A Moving Image of Skepticism: Cavell on Film, Gender, and Gaslighting[[1]](#endnote-1)

Jonathan Havercroft

University of Southampton

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**Abstract:**

This article examines the political themes in Cavell's philosophy through a reading of the film ‘Gaslight’ in the context of contemporary American politics. It demonstrates how Cavell's ideas offer valuable insights into gender politics, fascism, and propaganda in American society. The article proceeds in three sections, first reviewing Cavell's ontology of film and genre to elucidate his claim that film embodies skepticism. Next, it analyzes gaslighting in the film as an enactment of gendered politics of skepticism and explores Cavell's resources for responding to it. Lastly, it investigates the political implications of gaslighting, particularly in light of its association with post-truth politics, using Cavell's interpretation as a philosophical framework to understand instances like Donald Trump's manipulation of America.

**Key Words:** Stanley Cavell, Film, Gaslighting, Donald Trump, gender politics, skepticism

**Introduction:**

While the connection between Cavell’s interests in film and his interests in skepticism have been noted by virtually every commentator on this aspect of his thought, few have explored how these cinematic analyses are also deeply political investigations. Cavell observes that ‘Because on film social role appears arbitrary or incidental, movies have an inherent tendency towards the democratic, or anyway the idea of human equality. (But because of the film’s equally natural attraction to crowds, it has opposite tendencies towards the fascistic or populistic)’ (1980, 35). This article explores the political themes in Cavell’s philosophy of cinema by offering a reading of *Gaslight* in the context of recent American politics.

The article demonstrates how Cavell provides resources for thinking through gender politics, fascism, and propaganda in American life. Pre-modern modes of artistic expression, such as painting and drama, singled out individuals and placed them in a privileged place above the audience. The subjects of these works of art tended to be elites, either members of the aristocracy or monarchs. By contrast, film is very much a medium of the era of mass politics. Its preferred subjects are ordinary people and crowds. As such, it tends to favor mass political ideologies, ranging from liberal democracy (which Cavell associates with comedy and melodrama) to fascism (which we most famously associate with the films of Leni Riefenstahl) (1980, 35). His writings on film work through his anxieties about politics in the face of skepticism, simultaneously identifying examples of the ethos of perfectionism as well as warnings about the personal and political price of rejecting perfectionism.[[2]](#endnote-2)

To unpack both of these aspects of Cavell’s writings on film, this article proceeds in three sections. Section 1 reviews Cavell’s understanding of the ontology of film and film genre in order to elucidate what he means by his claim that ‘film is a moving image of skepticism’ (1980, 188) and how the genre of the melodrama of the unknown woman enacts skepticism’s gendered nature. Section 2 discusses how, according to his interpretation of the film, the act of gaslighting involves bringing the victim into a state of hyperbolic doubt, which is no different from the position from which Descartes developed his famous concept of the *cogito*. Gaslighting, then, enacts a gendered politics of skepticism, and Cavell’s interpretation of the film explains both how this happens and what resources exist to respond to it. Section 3 examines the political implications of this reading of gaslighting. Since Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign, commentators have revived the term in popular discourse to both critique Trump’s manipulative political behavior and to call out the broader roll of gaslighting in reinforcing patriarchal practices. Gaslighting is one of the more insidious forms of propaganda that is associated with post-truth politics. Cavell’s interpretation of the film and the gendered nature of skepticism provides us with philosophical resources to make sense of Trump’s gaslighting of America.

# 1. Film as a Moving Image of Skepticism

One of Cavell’s central claims about film’s ontology is that it enacts the skeptic’s fantasy of making the world present while maintaining the viewer’s absence. This relationship between viewer, image, and reality exemplifies how the skeptic understands the relationship between subject and object (Cavell 1980, 21). Descartes’ thought experiments about an evil demon creating a complete illusion about the external world, and his puzzles over the inability to tell the difference between dreams and waking life anticipate the experience of film.[[3]](#endnote-3) In both of those thought experiments, reality is nothing more than a succession of moving images that the subject passively views. Skepticism and cinema both transform the human subject ‘into an absent viewer of the world rather than simply one of its inhabitants’ (Mulhall 1994, 229). By separating the viewer from the reality captured on film, the screen satisfies the skeptic’s deepest fantasy—to be able to see the world without interacting with it or being responsible for ensuring its existence. While he describes film as a moving image of skepticism, Cavell also contends that some of film’s conditions of possibility provide resources to respond to the skeptical impulse. His interpretations of the genre of the melodrama of the unknown woman, with its focus on female sanity and male deception, is one area in which Cavell develops a response to skepticism.

To appreciate the significance of Cavell’s intuition that genre films are a site through which a culture works out its debates over the question of what constitutes a life worth living (2005, 11), we must first ask how his understanding of genre is different from that of conventional film studies. A textbook definition of film genre is ‘A set of conventions and formulas, repeated and developed through film history, which organize and categorize films according to repeated subjects, icons, and styles’ (Corrigan and White 2004, 519). As with his philosophy of language, Cavell’s understanding of genre accepts and modifies the role of conventions. In his early writings on language, Cavell argued that conventions and criteria do not, in and of themselves, guarantee the meanings of words. Instead, our shared linguistic meanings rest upon our collective agreements on forms of life (2002, 52). Similarly, there is no essential list of features that constitutes the genre of film. Instead, the members of the genre accept and modify its features through each instantiation. Whereas many highbrow film critics are likely to dismiss genre films as conventional—and hence unoriginal and not worthy of serious study—Cavell maintains that they should be studied as a set precisely to see how each film accepts a genre’s conventions and then projects them into new contexts.

Cavell analyzed two film genres in succession. The first is remarriage comedies, and the second is the melodrama of the unknown woman. On Cavell’s reading the melodrama of the unknown woman negates the core features of remarriage comedies. Consequently we must consider Cavell’s reading of both genres. Cavell maintains that remarriage comedies enact an idea that the primary purpose of ethics is the constitution of the self through our conversations with others. In these films, the female and male leads work out who they are, both individually and as a couple, through their witty repartee.[[4]](#endnote-4) The genre of the remarriage comedy has five key features (Cavell 1981, 29–34). First, and most significantly as the name implies, the central pair in the remarriage comedy either were or are married when the story begins. The threatened end of the marriage is the central conflict of the film. Second, the film’s narrative seeks to reunite the pair. In order to do this, the characters must undergo some kind of transformation. Typically, the male protagonist must recognize his responsibility for damaging the relationship and transform into someone who the female protagonist finds desirable again. The female protagonist must likewise discover who she is outside of the marriage in order to return to the relationship as a fully self-actualized independent woman. Third, in remarriage comedies the woman’s mother is rarely present,[[5]](#endnote-5) and the father, when present, is on the side of her desire. In a classical romance, such as Romeo and Juliet, the parents are often the primary obstacle to the couple getting together. In remarriage comedies, the primary obstacle to the couple’s reunion is their selves and their relationship to each other. Fourth, in remarriage comedies the woman never has a child, and is at an age at which ‘the choice of motherhood will be forced upon her or forced away from her’ (Cavell 1997, 4). Fifth, the mode of conversation between the pair runs throughout the film. Cavell notes the connection between the centrality of conversation as a common device in remarriage comedies and John Milton’s claim that ‘a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and noblest end of marriage.’ (Milton 2015, 25) Conversation is a mode of dialogue that is open ended and through which the participants work out who they are. In remarriage comedies, the breakdown in conversation threatens the breakup of the marriage. The primary characters in the film save their marriage by renewing their conversation with each other.

The melodrama of the unknown woman genre negates all five constituent features of remarriage comedies. First, and most significantly, melodramas end with ‘the negation of marriage itself’ (Cavell 1997, 6). Either the female protagonist leaves an unhappy marriage, or she refuses to get married at all. Second, the melodrama’s arc focuses on escaping from a tyrannical relationship with a man. The male protagonist is either unable to claim the woman or else ‘he is reactively potent or brutal in his demands’ (Cavell 1997, 30). Conversely, the female protagonists in both melodramas and comedies live a life that Cavell equates with Emersonian perfectionism. However, the women in the melodramas come to realize that they can only achieve their self-reliance independently, without the male protagonist. Both genres question whether the pair ‘can become and stay friends’ (Cavell 1997, 10). The remarriage comedies answer this question with a provisional yes, and the melodramas with a definitive no. Third, the woman’s parents are an obstacle to her happiness. The father (unlike in the comedies) ‘is not on the side of her desire but on the side of the law’ (Cavell 1997, 5). In the comedies, the woman’s mother is always absent, whereas in the melodramas she is always present and often depicted as being in competition with her daughter (Cavell 1997, 6). Fourth, whereas in the comedies the woman is always childless, in the melodramas she is usually shown as in an explicit maternal relationship with a child (e.g. as a mother or stepmother). Fifth, whereas the conversation between the pair drives the comedies’ narratives, the negation of conversation between them leads to the dissolution of their marriage at the film’s end.

The melodramas of the unknown woman present the audience with a gendered response to skepticism. Cavell understands both melodramas and remarriage comedies as possessing a narrative structure that negotiates between the ordinary and the skeptical. He reasons that ‘If some image of marriage, as an interpretation of domestication . . . is the fictional equivalent of what these philosophers understand to be the ordinary, or the everyday, then the threat to the ordinary named skepticism should show up in fiction’s favorite threat to forms of marriage, namely in forms of melodrama’ (Cavell 2018, 130). In remarriage comedies, the couple usually rediscovers themselves and their relationship through acknowledging each other. These melodramas typically negate this dialectic. Rather than struggling to be recognized by the woman (as his analogue is in remarriage comedies), the melodramatic man struggles *against* being recognized by his partner. The male protagonist conceals something significant from his female partner—either another lover (as in *Stella Dallas*, *Now, Voyager*, and *Letter from an Unknown Woman*) or a great evil that he has done to the woman (as in *The Marquise of O--* and *Gaslight*). Conversely, ‘[t]the woman’s struggle is to understand why recognition by the man has not happened or been denied or has become irrelevant’ (Cavell 1997).

Cavell labels these melodramas of the unknown woman (aside from sharing the title of one of the genre’s members) because the leading women in these films are unknown, in the sense of being unacknowledged, by the men with whom they are paired. Their existence as independent and autonomous beings is denied by their male partner and often frustrated by their parents. Their struggle in these films is to fashion a self under conditions in which those closest to them place overwhelming pressure on them to conform to societal expectations. Cavell sees the female leads of these movies as enacting Emerson’s spirit of self-reliance and aversive democracy.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Cavell juxtaposes the melodramas he studies to Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance. Cavell, through his reading of the Emersonian features of melodrama, points his readers to a different side of Emerson than the commonly received defender of individual autonomy and self-expression. In Cavell’s reading, Emerson is not merely defending the individual against pressure to conform to society’s expectations. Self-reliance also provides a means of resisting skepticism. Cavell critiques skepticism because it seeks objective universal criteria for truth at the expense of individual responsibility for our knowledge claims.[[7]](#endnote-7) Cavell sees melodramatic narratives as enacting a response to Descartes’s problem of the ego. Like Cavell, Descartes’s primary philosophical puzzle was skepticism. Descartes’s famous insight was *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am).[[8]](#endnote-8) Thinking—cognition—proves my existence.

Cavell, however, observes that contemporary philosophy’s memory of Descartes’s insight deceives us (2018, 107). While Descartes did write ‘I think therefore I am,’ it appears in his *Discourse on Method*. In *Meditations on First Philosophy,* where Descartes actually sets out to prove his existence against radical doubt, he phrases the *cogito* slightly differently. In *Meditations* Descartes writes, ‘So that, after having thought carefully about it, and having scrupulously examined everything, one must then, in conclusion, take as assured that the proposition: *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind.’[[9]](#endnote-9)

For Cavell, Descartes’s formulation of the *cogito* contains two significant elements. First, when Descartes phrases the *cogito* in this way it is not a logical proposition but a performative utterance. Second, Cavell observes that Emerson echoes Descartes’s phrase in the middle of ‘Self-Reliance.’ Emerson writes, ‘Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; He dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage’ (Emerson 1981a, 151). By juxtaposing Emerson’s formulation of the *cogito* with Descartes’s formulation, Cavell draws out the performative dimension of this famous quote (Hintikka 1967). This juxtaposition simultaneously draws attention to how Emersonian self-reliance is itself an articulation of the *cogito* and a response to the threat of skepticism. Melodrama, on Cavell’s account, is an enactment of the *cogitio*’s tension between its thinking self and its existing self.

Descartes’s *cogito* takes on a very different meaning if we read it as a performative utterance rather than a logical inference. As Jaakub Hintikka observes, the validity of the *cogito* rests on the fact that it is a performative contradiction to declare one’s non-existence. Declaring ‘I do not think’ or ‘I do not exist’ does not make any sense. The proof of my existence then rests upon my ‘continued willingness to declare it and receive recognition’ (Hammer 2002, 115). No logical inference can achieve the certainty that I exist. Instead, Cavell argues that Emerson’s reading of Descartes shows us that ‘I am a being who to exist must say I exist, or must acknowledge my existence—claim it, stake it, enact it’ (Cavell 2018, 109).

Yet this emphasis on declaring (rather than proving) one’s existence does not refute skepticism. In the conventional, analytic interpretation of Descartes’s *cogito*, the proof ‘I think, therefore I am’ is the one thing Descartes can know with certainty. On this reading, so long as I think, I exist. And since I continuously think, I must continuously exist. However, Cavell, citing Freud and Nietzsche, casts doubt on the claim that I continuously think. Often, I do not think, or (following Freud) I am not aware of my unconscious thoughts. If the act of thinking is what assures my existence, then the truth of skepticism is that when I do not think, I do not exist. Emerson, in his reading of the *cogito*, presses this idea further. He argues that most of us, most of the time, simply do not think. If and when I do not think ‘I do not exist, that I as it were haunt the world, a realization perhaps expressed by saying that the life I live is the life of skepticism’ (Cavell 2018, 108).

On this reading, Emersonian self-reliance is not about liberal individualism, but instead grapples with the deep suffering in which we find ourselves in society. In the transcendentalist writings, Thoreau describes our state as ‘lives of quiet desperation’ (Thoreau 1975, 263) and Emerson observes that ‘The state of society is one in which members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man’ (Emerson 1981b, 52). For Cavell, this is the state we are in when we do not exist. In the melodrama of the unknown woman, this is also the state in which the female protagonist finds herself. She merely haunts the world, unthinking and uncertain of her existence. The unknown woman is unknown to herself, to her interlocutors, and to the film’s audience. The narrative arc of these films requires the unknown woman to discover herself by declaring her existence.

On Cavell’s reading, *cogito* is necessarily gendered. The expression ‘I think. I am’ points to two different modes of being. Thinking is the active pole: Cavell relates this mode to skepticism, for it is only by thinking that I can raise doubts about my existence. Existing is the passive pole, which Cavell equates with responsiveness. When I am simply in open responsiveness to the world, I can acknowledge others as they are and accept the world as it is. Through his reading of melodramatic film, Cavell argues that these two modes of being are gendered. The active, thinking, self is masculine. The passive, existing, self is feminine.

It is important to note that Cavell is not making an essentializing claim about the mental modes of men and women. He does insist that all humans both think and exist, and as such have both masculine and feminine aspects to their selves (Cavell 1997, 97–104). Yet what he does find striking in Western theater and film is that male characters act out the skeptical impulses Cavell links to thinking, and female characters act out the haunting of the world that Cavell equates with existing. Neither mode of existence is ideal. One of the points of these narrative arcs is that they show characters trapped in these states, and their struggles to overcome them. Shakespearean tragedies depict male characters as gripped by skepticism, and the ruin that comes from their failures to acknowledge others and accept the world. Remarriage comedies show how skeptical doubts can ruin a relationship, but also how these relationships can be repaired through conversations of loving acknowledgment. The melodramas of the unknown woman point to a case in which the thinking self, symbolized by the male villain, suppresses the existing self, symbolized by the unknown woman. Yet rather than leave the female protagonist in ruin (as happens in the tragedies), or see the protagonist redeemed with the assistance of a helpmeet (as in the remarriage comedies), the melodramas enact the *cogito*: the unknown woman must enact and claim her existence by herself and for herself.

In interpreting the melodrama of the unknown woman, then, Cavell raises an important question about the relationship of gender to his own work. Is the skeptical impulse an inherently masculine impulse? And if so, what are the gendered implications for Cavell’s project of democratic perfectionism?

# 2. Cavell’s Reading of *Gaslight*

Cavell uses the genre of the melodrama of the unknown woman to explore the gendered implications of perfectionism and skepticism. Under this reading, skepticism represents the loss of one’s sense of self, and perfectionism is the process whereby one claims one’s voice against society’s demands for self-repression. To fully appreciate the political import of melodrama, I now examine Cavell’s interpretation of the film *Gaslight.* Feminist criticism has renewed attention to the expression ‘gaslighting’ since Donald Trump’s election in 2016. The term describes the process of using psychological deception to trick a person into questioning their own sanity. It originates in the 1938 British play *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton, which George Cukor adapted into the 1944 film *Gaslight*, starring Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, and Joseph Cotten. Both the movie and play are psychological thrillers in which the husband manipulates the wife into believing that she is losing her mind. Psychologists have identified this practice as a specific form of relationship abuse (Calef and Weinshel 1981).

To appreciate these philosophical themes, we first need a brief account of the film. The movie opens in the moments after the murder of a famous opera singer named Alice Alquist in her London home. Her niece, Paula, interrupts the murderer before he can locate and steal Alice’s jewels. We learn that Paula was living with Alice after the death of Paula’s mother. The orphaned Paula moves to Italy to receive training as an opera singer. The movie jumps forward several years until Paula is an accomplished singer who meets and falls in love with Gregory Anton. After a two-week courtship, they marry. At Gregory’s insistence they return to Alice’s house in London. Gregory persuades Paula to move all of her aunt’s possessions to the attic. In the process, Paula discovers a letter addressed to her aunt from Sergius Bauer. Gregory suddenly becomes very angry, scaring Paula.

The relationship between Paula and Gregory rapidly deteriorates after the aunt’s belongings are moved. For example, Paula’s possessions begin to go missing. When the couple tour the Tower of London, Paula cannot find a brooch that Gregory gave her as a gift. Later a family painting disappears from the wall of the house. Gregory accuses Paula of stealing the missing items, but she has no recollection of moving anything. Paula also begins to hear footsteps coming from the attic. She notices that the gaslights in the home tend to brighten and dim for no apparent reason. As the film progresses, Gregory increasingly socially isolates Paula. He prevents her from participating in social events, claiming that her nerves are causing her to become a kleptomaniac. He also prohibits friends from visiting her. During a rare excursion from the house, Paula catches the attention of a young detective named Brian Cameron, who was a fan of Paula’s aunt. Seeing Paula prompts Brian to reopen the unsolved case into Alice’s murder.

As his investigation progresses, Brian begins to suspect that Gregory is the murderer. Brian surveils the house and the couple’s behaviors very closely. Gregory convinces Paula that she is suffering a mental breakdown. Gregory arranges to get power of attorney and asks a doctor to assess Paula for institutionalization. Brian observes that Gregory sneaks out of the house at night and then back into the attic. Eventually Brian tricks his way into the house to meet Paula. He gradually convinces her that she is not going mad, but that Gregory might be deceiving her on purpose. Brian confirms Paula’s observation that the gaslights in the house are flickering. Together, Paula and Gregory discover the letter from Sergius Bauer that had enraged Gregory in the beginning of the film.

At the same time, Gregory discovers Alice’s jewels, hidden in plain sight on a dress. Gregory returns home to discover that Brian visited Paula. Gregory tries to convince Paula that she imagined Brian’s visit, but Brian suddenly appears to confront Gregory and chases him to the attic. Brian detains Gregory by tying him to a chair. While Brian fetches some police officers to help with the arrest, Paula confronts Gregory. Gregory tries to persuade her to set him free, but Paula feigns insanity and threatens him with a knife; she claims not to know whether it is real. The film ends with Brian taking Gregory away and then asking if he might call on Paula sometime, implying that he has romantic feelings for her.

Part of the film’s power is that at least in the early scenes, the audience is not sure who to believe—Paula or Gregory. Only as the film progresses, and Gregory’s behavior becomes more aggressive and deceptive, does the audience suspect he is manipulating her. Paula’s confrontation at the end is cathartic precisely because she now turns the question of her sanity on her husband to terrorize him in the way he terrorized her. Cavell calls this scene Paula’s aria, which he identifies as the moment she claims herself by dissolving her marriage to Gregory (Cavell 1997, 48). Whereas the remarriage comedies end with the couple reunited through conversation, *Gaslight* ends with the marriage dissolved by Paula with an ironic monologue. Paula’s aria negates both the dialogic feature of the conversation and the requirement that it be sincere. Irony also pervades Gregory’s dialogue with Paula. He admonishes her ‘don’t get hysterical’ when it is he who is tricking her into hysteria. Gregory spends the whole movie suggesting things for Paula to imagine, while chastising her for imagining things (Cavell 1997, 47).

The use of irony in this instance is a vicious form of psychological torture. In its classic literary uses, irony is a technique in which a character says the opposite of what they mean, often with the purpose of revealing a subtler deeper truth than the literal meaning of the words. In philosophy, Socrates’s famous irony was meant to provoke his interlocutors to question the validity of their received truths in order to uncover their own ignorance.[[10]](#endnote-10) In *Gaslight*, the irony aims not to enlighten, but to render Paula confused and eventually insane. Whereas conversation, in Cavell’s perfectionist philosophy, aims to discover truth, the ironic dialogue in *Gaslight* not only destroys truth; it also destroys Paula’s capacity to know what is true. The irony of Gregory’s gaslighting aims to leave Paula in a state of complete isolation. Whereas remarriage comedies seek to educate both partners in the marriage, the abusive relationship in *Gaslight* leaves Paul ‘decreated, tortured out of mind altogether’ (Cavell 1997, 49).

For Cavell, what is noteworthy about this psychological torture via irony is that it operates by depriving Paula ‘of words, of her right to words, of her own voice’ (Cavell 1997, 57). Cavell notes that Gregory deploys several strategies to gradually deprive Paula of her voice. He shames her by constantly contradicting what she sees and hears, and continuously disputes her claims of innocence until she begins to doubt it herself. He also describes events in a way that invites Paula to blame herself for them. Gregory’s gaslighting uses irony to deprive Paula of her capacity to tell her truth. In so doing, he eventually leaves her in a state where she cannot tell true from false, leaving her completely isolated from the world.

The madness that Gregory’s gaslighting inflicts on Paula is a version of skepticism. Descartes’s thought experiments in *Meditations on First Philosophy* are often described as hyperbolic doubt. In *Gaslight*, Gregory’s actions inflict hyperbolic doubt on Paula. Descartes asks if all that he perceives through his senses is a hallucination. Gregory’s tricks lead Paula to become convinced she *is* hallucinating. In the concluding scenes Brian helps Paula connect the dimming of the lights to Gregory’s excursions. As Cavell observes, ‘A dog would have no trouble making such a connection. Only a human could be *prohibited* from making it, from subjecting herself to her own words, having her own thoughts’ (Cavell 1997, 58). Cavell’s point is not that Paula is dumber than a dog, but that humans are the only creatures capable of doubting their own senses. Brian leads Paula back to her senses by matching her perceptions with his, so she can confirm that what she perceives *does* correspond to the world, and that she can then trust her senses again. Cavell notes that Brian’s procedures in these scenes are similar to the techniques psychoanalysts use to treat patients who are experiencing delusions.[[11]](#endnote-11) Only a human could be deceived by a trickster such as Gregory, because to be human means always being potentially unguarded and prone to suggestion.

On this reading, *Gaslight* is a film about our continuous vulnerability to skepticism. Skepticism and madness both touch upon a common, ordinary feature of the human experience. We can all experience the loss of our senses, and a loss of trust that what we see and experience is really there. Cavell argues that sanity and skepticism are linked in their shared ‘repudiation of language (or reason) by itself—and about the recovery from this repudiation as the return, if it is possible, from tragedy, say from the community’s expulsion’ (Cavell 1997, 64). Cavell sees skepticism’s constant presence in our philosophy, art, literature, and film as proof that it is an essential feature of the human condition. Rather than something to be prevented, he sees philosophy and literature as showing us that skepticism is something that we must overcome in order to fashion ourselves.

Paula’s escape from Gregory’s clutches offers a model of how to overcome the madness of skepticism and the hallucinations that Cavell equates with it. Paula’s state for much of the film is as a ghost. When he first sees Paula at the Tower of London, Brian (the detective) declares to his companion ‘I thought I just saw a ghost’ (Cavell 1997, 71). In the latter half of the film Paula is often seen from a distance, through the eyes of strangers who wonder who this woman is and what she is up to. Cavell remarks that Paula ‘merely haunts the world’ (Cavell 1997, 71), and is too timid to be herself or to fully engage with the world around her. Cavell equates her state throughout much of *Gaslight* with Emerson’s state of conformity. In ‘Self-Reliance’ Emerson argued that society sees to it that most of its members spend most of their time conforming to its expectations. Paula, in seeking to act according to her husband’s wishes, ends up being subjected to his cruel tortures. For Cavell and Emerson, the state of conformity is characterized by ‘voicelessness—or say, hyperbolic inexpressiveness—and thus as a form of madness’ (Cavell 1997, 66). Paula merely haunts the world because Gregory, through his psychological tortures, has deprived her of the confidence to speak for herself.

For Emerson, the purpose of moral perfectionism is to break free of this conformity by thinking against society—by engaging in a practice Cavell calls aversive thinking. For Cavell, Paula’s confrontation with Gregory in the final scene of the film is such an act of aversive thinking. Paula employs the techniques that Gregory uses against her—the tendency to doubt what she sees and his attempt to drive her mad—to terrorize him. When he asks Paula to cut him free, she responds that she is not sure if it is a knife in her hands and threatens to stab him with it. Yet she breaks free of Gregory and her marriage, thus breaking the spell of his gaslighting, and becomes her own person precisely because she can identify what is true.

Cavell finds in Paula an example of a heroine who achieves self-reliance in the face of domestic abuse. Cavell’s literary examples of self-reliance tend to feature a female who subverts gendered expectations to claim a life that is true to her. In *Gaslight*, Paula’s continued conformity would have resulted in Gregory institutionalizing her for a fake mental condition. This example of self-reliance is thus not simply a matter of Paula being true to herself or expressing a personal moral conviction that contradicts society’s expectations. Cavell’s point is that our continued conformity with society can jeopardize not just our sense of self-satisfaction, but also our sanity.

# 3. Donald Trump and the Gaslighting of America

A common charge against former U.S. President Donald Trump is that he is a ‘gaslighter.’ Shortly after Trump’s election, Lauren Duca published an op-ed in *Teen Vogue* in which she accused the president-elect of gaslighting America:

To gaslight is to psychologically manipulate a person to the point where they question their own sanity, and that’s precisely what Trump is doing to this country. He gained traction in the election by swearing off the lies of politicians while constantly contradicting himself, often without bothering to conceal the conflicts within his own sound bites. He lied to us over and over again, then took all accusations of his falsehoods and spun them into evidence of bias (Duca 2016).

The editorial went viral. Throughout Trump’s presidency, commentators have invoked gaslighting to describe his outlandish lies. While Duca’s initial description of gaslighting does seem true to Gregory’s behavior towards Paula, Duca’s subsequent linking of these actions to Trump emphasizes his compulsive tendency to lie. Accusing a politician of lying is not exactly new. But accusing Trump of gaslighting, a specific form of abusive manipulation, is a new kind of allegation. So is Trump gaslighting, as opposed to merely lying (a lot)? And what is the political significance of his gaslighting, given that lying is as old as politics?

To answer these questions, we must first consider what gaslighting is. Psychoanalysts began using the term gaslightingin the early 1970s (Calef and Weinshel 1981; Smith and Sinanan 1972; Barton and Whitehead 1969; Cawthra, O’Brien, and Hassanyeh 1987; Kutcher 1982). They equated the phenomenon with a particular type of abusive relationship. In most cases, a male perpetuated psychological abuse against a female partner to get her to accept a false view of reality that he had constructed to his own advantage. Psychoanalysts argued that the cause of gaslighting was a ‘process of projective identification’(Abramson 2014, 6, fn.4). The gaslighter feels anxious about something but refuses to acknowledge the source of his anxiety. Instead, as a coping mechanism the gaslighter projects the anxiety onto his partner. In a healthy relationship, the partner will reject this projection as untrue. But in a relationship where the gaslighter has over a long period of time worn down his partner’s defense mechanisms, the partner will internalize the gaslighter’s version of events as true. In the psychoanalytic account, gaslighting is not so much about lying as manipulating the victim so they will accept the gaslighter’s viewpoint.

While the psychoanalytic account offers an insight into why the gaslighter behaves as he does, recent work in feminist philosophy has offered a richer account of gaslighting as a particularly gendered exercise of systemic power. Rather than focusing on the psychological states of the gaslighter and his victim, feminists interpret gaslighting as a form of ‘epistemic injustice’—a term coined by Miranda Fricker to describe ‘a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower.’[[12]](#endnote-12) One particular variety of epistemic injustice is testimonial injustice, where a speaker’s words are treated as unreliable simply due to societal prejudice against the speaker’s social group. The victim of epistemic justice has her status as a knower ‘unfairly denied or disregarded’ simply because she is a member of a marginalized group (Manne 2020, 140). Kate Manne developed the closely related concept of ‘epistemic entitlement’(Manne 2020, 140). Whereas epistemic injustice describes how some knower’s claims are devalued, epistemic entitlement describes how some knowers have an unwarranted entitlement to expect their claims to be believed. According to Manne, ‘epistemic entitlement involves peremptorily assuming greater authority to speak, on the part of a more privileged speaker’ (Manne 2020, 141). Epistemic entitlement often makes testimonial injustice possible. Manne identifies this dynamic of a male speaker claiming knowledge without justification and diminishing a female speaker's claims to know in two common phenomena—mansplaining and gaslighting.

Mansplaining involves a male explaining something incorrectly to a more knowledgeable female (Manne 2020, 139).[[13]](#endnote-13) Manne argues that mansplaining is unjust because it denies women both their truth and their authority. Gaslighting takes the hierarchical relationship a step further to establish a state of ‘epistemic domination’ (Manne 2020, 153). The victim of gaslighting is prohibited from disputing the gaslighter’s version of reality. As Abramson observes, ‘The central desire or aim of the gaslighter is to destroy even the possibility of disagreement—to have his sense of the world not merely confirmed, but placed beyond dispute’ (Abramson 2014, 10). Gaslighting, then, is not merely lying, but manipulating the target to deny them the standing to voice their truth, and then using their silence to compel them to acquiesce to the gaslighter’s version of reality.

In addition to the epistemological effects of gaslighting, Abramson has identified two ways in which the gaslighter harms his victim. First, he denies her the ability to voice her perspective in disagreement with him. Second, the gaslighter seeks to deny his victim standing altogether so that it is impossible for her to challenge his version of events (Abramson 2014). *Gaslight* portrays Gregory’s attempt to deny Paula standing through his efforts to institutionalize her. By having a psychiatrist declare Paula mentally unfit, Gregory uses the juridical power of the state to empower him to speak on her behalf. While this is a melodramatic portrayal of how the gaslighter operates, the ultimate goal in denying the speaker standing is to bring about her ‘existential silencing’ (Abramson 2014, 18). As Cavell observed in his interpretation of *Gaslight*, Gregory’s manipulation of Paula deprived her of her voice. Gaslighting is particularly morally perverse because it draws upon power inequity: a patriarchal society presumes that male speakers are more competent and knowledgeable than female speakers. The gaslighter leverages this presumption to deprive his female target of her standing. He does this by getting others to accept his version of events over hers, and by manipulating her into eventually accepting his professed entitlement to knowledge. Gaslighting, then, is wrong because it enacts an epistemic injustice in which the victim’s knowledge claims are unfairly dismissed. It stifles disagreement, and existentially silences the victim.

Did Donald Trump gaslight America during his time in office? He certainly did engage in epistemic entitlement. His more infamous tendencies included either claiming expertise where he has none or claiming credit for a discovery for which he is not responsible (Chen n.d.). One of his verbal tendencies was to claim, ‘Nobody knows more about X than me.’[[14]](#endnote-14) In one famous episode in September 2019, he listed the state of Alabama as being in the path of Hurricane Dorian. While early projections had suggested the hurricane might make landfall in Alabama, by the time Trump tweeted out the prediction, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had changed its projection for the storm. Trump’s statement confused the residents of Alabama, some of whom started calling the authorities to seek clarification about Hurricane Dorian’s path. When the National Weather Service and NOAA refuted Trump’s claim, he doubled down on his assertion that the storm could hit Alabama and claimed that he knew more about hurricanes than the experts. As the controversy escalated in the media, Trump continued to insist that his claim that the hurricane could hit Alabama was correct. On September 4 he went so far as to show reporters a map with the storm’s projected path altered with a Sharpie marker to make it look as if the storm could hit Alabama (Embury-Dennis 2019). He also directed NOAA to publish a statement on September 6 supporting his claim that the storm path included Alabama.(Law and Martinez 2019)

This pattern of Trump asserting epistemic entitlement has run from the start of his presidency, when he pressured the National Park Service to change the reported size of his inauguration crowd, to his downplaying of the severity of COVID-19 despite knowing how serious a threat the disease was in February 2020,(*BBC News* 2020) through to his refusal to concede the 2020 election, and his eventual attempt to overturn the election by inciting a mob to interrupt Congress’s certification of presidential electors. Commentators often cite these episodes as instances of post-truth. While much press coverage during the Trump administration has focused on facts and lying, the focus on truth overlooks what Trump is doing. Trump, as a gaslighter, is using his epistemic entitlement to assert authority where he has none.

Much of the liberal pushback against Trump has focused on facts and lies. Liberals ground their critique of Trump in an epistemology in which there is a set of pre-existing facts in the world that we can use to verify the validity of truth claims. After Trump took office, many news outlets increased their fact checking to counter his claims. From an epistemological viewpoint, however, this approach is facile and plays into Trump’s hands. One way of reading Trump’s attempts to assert epistemic authority is that he exploits the external world skeptic’s argument for his own political ends. In Cavell’s interpretation of skepticism, the skeptic exploits our disappointment in our criteria to undermine our certainty about truth claims. Since criteria ultimately rest upon our shared agreement in them, and we use them to make judgments about whether something is true the skeptic exploits the possibility that we can disagree on our criteria to argue that we can therefore never be certain that something is true. Trump is not interested in making a skeptical argument, but he exploits this approach for political ends. Rather than use the possibility of disagreement over criteria to undermine our certainty in our judgments, Trump simply disagrees about the criteria: he asserts that his criteria are correct and dismisses the standing of his critics.

While Cavell distinguishes between Wittgensteinian criteria and our ordinary uses of the term, one crucial feature in both is what authority validates the criteria we use to make our judgments. In the ordinary uses of criteria that Cavell presents in *The Claim of Reason*, the authority is usually an institution (Cavell 1999, 6–7). In Wittgensteinian uses of criteria, the authority is competent native language speakers—i.e., all members of the community. Trump attacks both sources of authority to make his truth claims valid. As president, he had the institutional power to compel agencies to issue policies in line with his political preferences. Scientific agencies in particular often put in place policies to insulate their experts from political influence over their judgments. However, as the hurricane example demonstrates, Trump was comfortable using the power of his office to manipulate state authority structures to issue statements that conform to his understanding of reality.

In many cases these agencies do have a truth-making function. The NOAA is responsible for issuing storm predictions and projections. The National Park Service is responsible for issuing crowd size estimates of protests at national parks. Both sets of facts involve statistical estimates using a set of procedures agreed upon by experts. But as is the case with just about any fact, there is a degree of uncertainty in the estimate. Skeptics, and Trump, exploit this uncertainty to undermine confidence in the projection.

For gaslighting to work, however, it requires more than a perpetrator to undermine confidence in our epistemic authority structures. The target of gaslighting must be brought to a state of existential silencing. In particular, the target would need to meet three criteria outlined by Manne and Abramson. First, they would need to accept a version of reality that contradicts that contradicts what they previously knew to be true.[[15]](#endnote-15) Second, the possibility of presenting a different interpretation of reality would have to be eliminated. Third, the target would need to be silenced by being denied standing to make a rival truth claim. Trump has certainly tried to both silence disagreement and deny rival truth claims standing. He had greater success at blocking the publication of U.S. government reports and findings that contradicted his viewpoint. But his actions also provoked significant pushback from media groups and experts outside the government. Many news outlets that once tried to be politically neutral, were more vociferous in calling out Trump’s lies. Both scientists and the media resisted his attempts to discredit science in areas from climate change to COVID-19. While Trump supporters tended to parrot his version of reality, a vocal plurality of Americans resisted his attempts to distort the truth.

This points to what is potentially unique about Trumpism. While there have been many attempts to identify parallels between Trump and fascism, Trump’s gaslighting tactic is an original form of political propaganda and power. In classic authoritarian and fascist regimes, the primary instrument for controlling the truth was exercising direct control of media outlets and using violence and censorship to control political opponents. Trump did not do this; despite occasional threats to close down media outlets, his primary tactic was gaslighting. This tactic of gaslighting culminated in his ‘Big Lie’ about the 2020 Presidential Election, when he refused to concede, and continues to this day to insist that the election was stolen. This culminated in the January 6th insurrection, when a mob incited by his gaslighting stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to keep Trump in power.

According to Cavell, the counter to gaslighting is Emersonian perfectionism. By recognizing the limits of our certainty about truth and the vulnerability of our criteria to skeptical refutation, we realize that truth is not something that exists in the external world waiting to be discovered; it is instead something we each must bear responsibility for and sustain through contestation and conversation. In response to gaslighting’s claims of epistemic entitlement, democratic perfectionism counters that each of us has the responsibility and potential to speak the truth. In response to the gaslighter’s demand that the victim acquiesce to the gaslighter’s version of truth, democratic perfectionism celebrates agonistic disagreement as necessary for sustaining and uncovering truth. In contrast to the gaslighter’s demand that the victim is silent, democratic perfectionism sees resistance to a culture’s demands for conformity and the reclaiming of one’s voice as necessary steps towards democratic renewal. As Hannah Arendt famously observed: ‘The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.’ (Arendt 1973, 474) From a Cavellian perspective, the great danger with Trump is not fascism (although as January 6th shows that danger is certainly there), but a triumph of a political skepticism that renders a culture mute, unable to resist, or to recognize that the burden of sustaining the truth (and the culture that respects it) falls to each of us.

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2. For a critique of Cavell’s claims that film offers insight into the ethical dimension of human life and that it can be a resource for cultivating a democratic ethos see Dienstag (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Descartes’s famous ‘First Meditation,’ subtitled ‘About the Things We May Doubt,’ proposes both of these thought experiments to argue that we cannot accept our sense perceptions or our logical deductions with any certainty. This meditation presents the most forceful argument for skepticism, developing a position that subsequent philosophers called hyperbolic doubt. As this is the most influential skeptical argument in the history of Western philosophy, much of Cavell’s work is in implicit and explicit dialogue with it. For the dream argument and evil demon argument, see Descartes (1984, 96–101) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Anthony Laden, in his model of social reasoning, draws on Cavell’s analysis of marriage as an open-ended conversation to develop the conversational norms of continuation and equality. See Laden (2012, 130) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A notable exception is *The Philadelphia Story*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I take the term aversive democracy from Aletta Norval, who draws upon Cavell to develop an account of democracy in which ‘the emphasis is on disagreements, on ‘separateness of positions’, and on ongoing conversations and differences of position’ (2007, 175). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cavell sees the individual and community as necessarily in productive tension with each other. The self struggles for self-realization in opposition to the received norms of the community, and this renews the community by preventing it from stagnating. But at the extreme, the individual who tries to live without the community ends up alienated and estranged from it and, by extension, themself (Cavell 2018, 105–6). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This formulation appears in the first paragraph of the fourth discourse (Descartes 1984, 53). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This formulation appears in the fourth paragraph of the second meditation (Descartes 1984, 103). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Vlastos (1987) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bonnie Honig offers a similar reading of *Gaslight*, linking the film to the shock-politics of the Trump administration. While she does not reference Cavell’s reading of the film, she does link Paula’s search for the truth of her experiences to Hannah Arendt’s claim that truth requires plurality, and the ‘corroboration of others’. See Honig (2021, 19–25) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (Fricker 2007, 1) For an account of gaslighting that explores it as a form of epistemic injustice, see (Spear 2019; Manne 2020, chap. 8) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Although the word mansplaining is not used in her essay, Rebecca Solnit’s ‘Men Explain Things To Me’, I believe is the first essay to describe the phenomenon (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See the following YouTube video which splices together clips of Trump claiming ‘Nobody know more about X than I do’ dating back to the 1980s. (NowThis News 2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this formulation of the first criterion of gaslighting. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)