Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

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14. Fetishism and Scepticism, or the Two Worlds of Christian Metz and Stanley Cavell

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Abstract
This chapter brings together Christian Metz and Stanley Cavell, who are rarely discussed on the same page. Metz worked as a semiologist or film theorist, and Cavell as a philosopher. Still, these two influential thinkers are linked through their common interest in the relation between ontology and belief, and especially the perceptual character of expressions of ontology and belief. Both thinkers depict this problem as a nearly universal experience, where evidence of the senses and of cognitive experience come into conflict with one another in the paradoxical structure of belief. For Metz, this rotation of belief around assertions of knowledge and denial is characteristic of the structure of fetishism; for Cavell, it is an expression of the logic of scepticism.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, film-philosophy, perceptual experience, photography, fetishism, image theory

In his 'Lecture on Ethics', prepared for delivery at the University of Cambridge sometime between September 1929 and December 1930, though unpublished in his lifetime, Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that final and conclusive agreements on such ordinary yet powerful human experiences as ethics, aesthetics, or belief cannot be hoped for. But this does not mean that experiences like belief are incommunicable or incomprehensible; hence Wittgenstein's long fascination with intermediate and impure cases as occasions for investigating these experiences philosophically, though often indirectly. In this way, Wittgenstein presents by example two philosophical procedures central to his later philosophy: the examination of intermediate
cases and the description of similarities and differences across patterns of family resemblance.¹

Disagreements on judgments of ethics, aesthetics, or belief present cases where humanity expresses its urge to run up against the limits of language. The failure to find an adequate concept or expression may indeed lead us to silence, but it is just as likely to produce in series a variety of different statements or forms of expression, all of which fail to convey these experiences adequately to ourselves or to others but which nonetheless bring forth the blurred outlines of the experience in our repeated attempts to convey it, like lines in a sketch that create the impression of a picture or idea as compelling as it is incomplete. There are thus no pure or final cases but only intermediate ones. However, the assembly of related intermediate cases and perspicuous grammatical investigation may make apparent a latent image that nowhere lies in the expressions themselves but rather emerges in patterns of similarity and difference perceived among or between the expressions so produced.

Consider these images or features expressions, then. But what we want to communicate, convey, apprehend, or understand lies nowhere in the image but rather is only graspable in a pattern of relationships that is itself neither pictured nor expressed, yet becomes ‘visible’, as it were, if only in an intuited way. Wittgenstein’s ‘Lecture on Ethics’ offers by example procedures for developing or drawing out these pictures through language in a process of comparing a number of more or less synonymous expressions that struggle to assess the defining characteristics of ethics. Though each expression differs slightly from the others, it is nonetheless possible to assemble patterns of difference and commonality in ways similar to the construction of a composite photograph. The effect thus produced is neither a consensual definition of ethics nor a complete and final understanding of the concept. Rather, as Wittgenstein might put it later on, definitions and concepts of ethics are deployed in a variety of language games in order to produce a pattern of family resemblances where different but overlapping conceptual senses can be ‘seen’.

In this essay, I want to bring together two powerful thinkers who are rarely discussed on the same page: Christian Metz and Stanley Cavell. Roughly contemporary and equally influential in promoting strong

versions of academic film studies, Metz and Cavell appear to approach cinema as if from two different worlds. Ever the semiologist (although a semiology tempered by phenomenology), Metz seeks to ground questions of meaning, belief, and perceptual experience in psychology, or rather psychoanalysis. This, of course, was the project of his hugely influential essay on ‘The Imaginary Signifier’. Though no less interested in psychoanalysis, Cavell approaches similar problems and experiences as a philosopher influenced by the later Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin’s investigations of ordinary language, though again in ways tempered by phenomenology.

Metz works as a semiologist or film theorist, and Cavell as a philosopher. Still, these two influential thinkers are linked through their common interest in investigating the relation between ontology and belief, and especially the perceptual character of expressions of ontology and belief. Both Metz and Cavell depict this problem as a nearly universal experience where evidence of the senses and of cognitive experience come into conflict with one another in the paradoxical structure of belief.

Consider, then, two of the most well-known statements in their respective oeuvres. In 1975, in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, Metz reconsiders Octave Mannoni’s depiction of the paradoxical logic of fetishism as the prototype of belief. Ten years later in his essay on ‘Photography and Fetish’, Metz condenses his account in the following description:

Because it attempts to disavow the evidence of the senses, the fetish is evidence that this evidence has indeed been recorded (like a tape stored in the memory). The fetish is not inaugurated because the child still believes its mother has a penis (= order of the imaginary), for if it still believed it completely, as ‘before’, it would no longer need the fetish. It is inaugurated because the child now ‘knows very well’ that its mother has no penis. In other words, the fetish not only has disavowal value, but also knowledge value.

2 In this essay, I will work primarily with the original English text. Metz’s influential text on ‘The Imaginary Signifier’ was first published in French in Communications, 23 (1975), pp. 3-55, and quickly translated into English and published in Screen, 16/2 (1975), pp. 14-76.

Here, perceptual experience permanently imprints a past perceptual experience that hovers uncertainly beneath present perceptual knowledge in ways that make indiscernible the borders between reality and fantasy, knowledge and denial. In both essays, Metz repeats and expands Mannoni’s propositional expression of this belief: ‘Je sais bien, mais quand même ...’ – ‘I know very well, but even so ...’.¹⁴

In the opening pages of The World Viewed, first published in 1971 and then in an expanded edition in 1979, Cavell presents another version of the paradox of perceptual belief in photography and cinema: ‘A photograph does not present us with “likenesses” of things; it presents us, we want to say, with the things themselves. But wanting to say that may well make us ontologically restless.’⁵ Similar to Metz’s characterization, Cavell observes that in looking at photographs, even though we know that a likeness is a representation, we want to say that the image also confronts us with worldly existence. We experience something like certainty, but ironically, it is an uncertain certainty. We are restless, and again our perception vacillates in a space between knowledge and belief.

This rotation of belief around assertions of knowledge and denial, reality and fantasy, is a common thread running through Metz and Cavell’s writings on photography and film. Another fascinating family resemblance between Metz and Cavell is their common tendency to approach a problem indirectly – to circle a question probing for original points of entry and then to proceed through loops and digressions. Not uncharacteristic of Metz’s writing, his brilliantly argued essay on ‘Photography and Fetish’ struggles to stay on topic. To begin my examination of the family resemblance between Metz and Cavell’s accounts of perceptual belief, I will concentrate on Metz’s later essay, for here it is clear that the queer logic of photographic belief is the primary trigger for his curiosity rather than the structure of fetishism.

In 1985, Metz’s commitment to psychoanalysis seems strong yet more distant than in his writing of ten years earlier. In this essay, discussions of the fetish and fetishism in psychoanalytic terms are treated more sceptically and contextualized through references to anthropology and myth. If Metz’s principal concern is how photography and film raise perceptually paradoxical questions of belief, or rather treat belief as a paradoxical relationship to the world, then the fetish here becomes itself a ‘fetish’ – a token, charm,


or talisman. Grounded in semiology and structuralism, whose residual positivism requires grounding in cultural and social convention, Metz needs a figure attached to psychology as much as to a logic or concept of belief. (Inter alia, this is why his approach is theoretical and not philosophical. I will return to this observation in my conclusion.) Metz seems disinclined here to take for granted the continuing power of psychological fetishism, nor does he assert as strongly that the logic of fetishism informs structures of cinematographic belief. Indeed, one of the principal arguments of the essay is that for a number of formal and perceptual reasons, cinema is a less powerful analogue to fetishism than photography. (Could the image in movement be a counterweight to fetishistic structures of belief or a path to their overcoming?)

In his conclusion, Metz emphasizes that, like Freud, his argument is an ‘interpretation’ of fetishism, an application and displacement of its possible meanings from one domain, psychology, to another, aesthetics. Moreover, Metz expresses dissatisfaction with the concept in both its Freudian and Lacanian versions because of its androcentrism, among other reasons. Nonetheless, the value of the concept is its potential for activation and production of new knowledge in another field, that of film theory, by testing the powers and limits of its analogical application in other domains.

In the wake of Metz’s canonic essay on ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, one of the most striking conclusions of ‘Photography and Fetish’, then, is that psychological fetishism is not a strong model for characterizing perceptual belief in cinema. In like manner, while acknowledging the important affinities between photography and cinema, Metz wants to make them ontologically distinct even more than Cavell does, and one criterion of that distinction is their closeness to or distance from the logic of fetishism. And in a final turn, perhaps fetishism is not the main point at all. Again, here in many ways it functions as a heuristic for exploring the deeper and paradoxical character of perceptual belief in relation to our claims about the existence of the image as a world or its presentations of the world.

The point I am trying to make here is that, for Metz, the interest in the concept of fetishism is less the basis for a theory than the drawing of a picture where fetishism yields a concept or itself becomes a new figure of logic. Metz places the figure in a moving metonymic chain whose effect is to shake loose its moorings in psychology, anthropology, and ethnology in order to clarify the peculiar perceptual situations in which photography and film place us. And these situations must be examined by establishing logical criteria, rather than grounding perceptual experience in potentially universalizing psychological causes or structures.
Herein lies another point of common interest shared by Metz and Cavell. Both assert that photography and film produce a powerful conviction of the real that is nonetheless counterbalanced by an ineluctable sense of unreality, and so much so that the dividing line between reality and unreality becomes indiscernible. Both work in their own ways and from their own perspectives to understand a perceptual vertigo produced by these images.
where knowledge and belief, reality and unreality rotate into and out of one another more or less undecidably.

For Cavell, the key term in this process is automatism; for Metz, indexicality. Yet there is another point of agreement here. Metz argues that the powers of indexicality derive from the photographic act or ‘the mode of production itself, the principle of the taking’.\(^6\) Whatever level of force of belief we attribute to the image, its testament to existence is bound to its automatic capacity to record, preserve, and transmit a relation of contiguity and connection to the world. For Metz, there is an interesting seam to the powers of photography and film in this respect. In virtue of its silence, its stasis, and its demotic character, photography ‘remains closer to the pure index, stubbornly pointing to the print of what was, but no longer is’.\(^7\) Below, as it were, all their other qualities or characteristics, photographs document and preserve. At the same time, we are on ground familiar to all readers of ‘The Imaginary Signifier’. Both the photographic image and the cinematographic image inhabit a curious temporality of presence and absence. In photography, this temporality is expressed as the disturbing co-presence of a past existence in time with a present image in space.

However, even if photography lives genetically in cinematography, Metz argues that it is transformed ontologically by projected movement. (This is the basis of yet another family resemblance to Cavell.) Despite all the documentary power that may reside within it in virtue of photography’s documentary powers, in its standard uses film transforms photographic processes in powerfully fictionalizing and creative ways. In other words, film creates new existence, new worlds, as much or more as preserving past worlds. In a kind of Aufhebung, film infuses photography with a new imaginary (and one where the imaginary logic of the fetish resides only unhappily). Through its unfolding in time, its capacity to absorb and put into play additional narrative and perceptual elements, and its power of disconnecting, reconnecting, and recontextualizing images, Metz observes that in cinematography the indexical power of photography frequently serves, paradoxically, as a realist guarantee for the unreal; in other words, it gives the imaginary or the unreal what might be called an unreasonable capacity to convince.

Therefore, photography and film must be distinguished not only by the presence of automated movement but also by their respective powers of temporal expression and stillness. Metz argues that even if cinema

\(^6\) Metz, ‘Photography and Fetish’, p. 82.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 83 (emphasis in original).
includes photography, cinema absorbs and transforms the still image in the creation of ‘a second movement, an ideal one, made out of successive and different immobilities. Movement and plurality imply time, as opposed to the timelessness of photography which is comparable to the timelessness of the unconscious and of memory.’8 The historical time of the photograph is transformed by serialized movement into the projection of an ideal time, perhaps even a utopic, heterocosmic time, though Metz does not quite put it this way. Nevertheless, in contrast to the transcriptive and preservative time of photography, film presents ‘a stream of temporality where nothing can be kept, nothing stopped’.9 For Metz, this capacity works against the power of the fetish. By extension, it may also undermine or overturn the fixity of belief in anticipation of new knowledge. Is this an argument for the creative capacity of time?

The qualities of immobility and silence, Metz also observes, are shared by photography and death. There is an authority to the photograph that testifies equally to non-existence and existence, or rather, to the existence of non-existence. In their respective acts of ‘taking’ or registration, photographic duration is qualitatively distinct from cinematographic duration – they ‘expose’ time differently. Metz characterizes the photographic act as the transport of the object into another kind of time: ‘the snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time – unlike cinema which replaces the object, after the act of appropriation, in an unfolding time similar to that of life.”10 The realism of cinematic projection, if there is one, is to enfold the viewer in the flow of time – a full and heterogeneous duration coterminous with the durée in which she actually lives.

Photographic time seems other to this living durée. In Metz’s language, there is something almost existentially murderous about photography. Taking a snapshot is depicted as a violent gesture of cutting inside the referent, as if lifting some segment of its body outside of the flow of time. The cut removes and preserves, but in the form of non-existence. The form of my body has slipped into the past, and as Roland Barthes often insisted, the time of photography thus presents a future anterior where a slipping into non-existence becomes the future that confronts us all. By the same token, the fact of this temporality informs photography and film as forms of memory. ‘The two modes of perpetuation are very different in their effects, and nearly

8 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
9 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
10 Ibid., p. 84.
opposed,’ Metz asserts. ‘Film gives back to the dead a semblance of life, a fragile semblance but one immediately strengthened by the wishful thinking of the viewer. Photography, on the contrary, by virtue of the objective suggestions of its signifier (stillness, again) maintains the memory of the dead as being dead.’ And in a rather subtle though no less astounding statement, Metz asserts that film does not found itself on photography but rather destroys the power and action of photography by energizing it, infusing stillness with ineluctable movement. Automated movement is reanimation. The reanimating character of automated movement is equally expressed in how the space off-frame or out of frame (hors cadre is the French term) is read differently in photography and film. In both cases, the edges or borders of the frame function less to organize a composition than to enact a displacement, where the logic of fetishism acts as a basis of comparison. The primal scene of castration fantasy displaces knowledge of empirical perception (the missing penis) by, as Metz puts it, stopping the look on a less threatening image, which nonetheless stands next to it. Here again, there is a paradoxical perception where non-existence and existence are simultaneously presented and asserted without the acknowledgement of contradiction while nonetheless incurring an uncanny affect. Space off-frame is anxious. It anticipates certain knowledge yet also delays it – it polarizes perception as if a slight rotation of perspective would reveal something one does not want to see or say. The remarkable expressive logic of fetishism thus combines a double and contradictory function. As metaphor it incites and encourages – it provides a veiling substitute or protective replacement buffering the subject against the acknowledgement of loss and non-existence. Functioning metonymically, it stands beside or is connected to the danger it is supposed to ward off. The fetish is a conduit to unhappy knowledge even while we ask it to ward off the danger sleeping next to it. And as it protects it also attests to an involuntary belief, ‘the warding off of bad luck or the ordinary, permanent anxiety which sleeps (or suddenly wakes up) inside each of us’.

Here again, fetishism marks a contrast between the time of photography and that of film. Conventionally speaking (because in both cases there are many unconventional expressions), the frame functions to distinguish photographic and cinematographic belief. In film, the space implied out-of-frame may always, in principle, be returned to the world in frame. Unseen space is not ontologically distinct from that world but

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 86.
rather contiguous with it – it may appear, or appear again, through camera movement or editing; the diegetic presence of a character out of frame may be asserted by the off-screen presence of their voice in frame. As Metz puts it,

The off-frame is taken into the evolutions and scansion of the temporal flow: it is off-frame, but not off-film. [...] The character who is off-frame in a photograph, however, will never come into the frame, will never be heard – again a death, another form of death. The spectator has no empirical knowledge of the contents of the off-frame, but at the same time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming the shape of this emptiness. It is a projective off-frame (that of the cinema is more introjective), an immaterial, ‘subtle’ one, with no remaining print. ‘Excluded’, to use [Philippe] Dubois’s term, excluded once and for all. Yet nevertheless present, striking, properly fascinating (or hypnotic) – insisting on its status as excluded by the force of its absence inside the rectangle of paper, which reminds us of the feeling of lack in the Freudian theory of the fetish.13

If Metz’s analogy between photography and fetishism holds, then the photographic frame suspends perception between two incommensurable dimensions of existence and non-existence, knowledge and belief. Here the violence of the photographic act returns in Metz’s argument. Metz characterizes the instant of photographic capture, the click of the shutter, as an act figuring castration – a singular and definitive cutting that

marks the place of an irreversible absence, a place from which the look has been averted forever. The photograph itself, the ‘in-frame’, the abducted part-space, the place of presence and fullness – although undermined and haunted by the feeling of its exterior, of its borderlines, which are the past, the left, the lost: the far away even if very close by, as in Walter Benjamin’s conception of the ‘aura’ – the photograph, inexhaustible

13 Ibid., pp. 86-87. Metz is relying on two important points of reference here. One is Philippe Dubois’s fascinating book, L’acte photographique (Paris & Brussels: Nathan and Labor, 1983). The other is Pascal Bonitzer’s work on off-frame space, especially his essay ‘Le hors-champ subtil’, Cahiers du cinéma, 311 (1986), pp. 4-7. Here Bonitzer makes a distinction between the filmic frame off, which implies a space filled (étouffé) with potential for further revealed and revealing images, and the photographic frame off, whose implied unseen space is more reticent or subtle.
reserve of strength and anxiety, shares, as we see, many properties of the fetish (as object), if not directly of fetishism (as activity). 14

Like the fetish, photography is grounded in a peculiar act of apperception – a more or less permanent instance wherein the polarizing affects of frame and off-frame, seen and unseen, presence and absence, belief and knowledge, desire and anxiety are caught in an instant of infinite repetition. Alternatively, film plays with or on these affects by putting them into movement, temporalizing them in narrative scenarios of series and differentiation. As Metz puts it, film enacts the possibility of playing with fetishism, while the photograph itself is more capable of actually becoming a fetish. Film makes drama out of fetishistic repetitiveness, fictionalizes as it were. With its complex formal and narrative play on the out-of-frame, cinema toys with the combination of desire and fear, pleasure and terror evoked by fetishistic belief. Metz writes:

The moving camera caresses the space, and the whole of cinematic fetishism consists in the constant and teasing displacement of the cutting line which separates the seen from the unseen. But this game has no end. Things are too unstable and there are too many of them on the screen. It is not simple – although still possible, of course, depending on the character of each spectator – to stop and isolate one of these objects, to make it able to work as a fetish. 15

There is thus something like a turn of magic in projected movement, a point that Cavell also makes, and Metz presents this idea as a classical theme in film theory. Invoking again Octave Mannoni’s condensation of the expression of fetishistic belief and denial, ‘I know very well, but even so ...’. Metz insists again on the uncanny strangeness of both photographic and cinematographic belief. On the one hand, the spectator is never ‘fooled’ by an image. She or he knows with certainty what a representation is and never

14 Metz, ‘Photography and Fetish’, p. 87.
15 Ibid., p. 88. New technologies of presentation, especially digital presentation, have dramatically transformed the terms in which we now speak about stillness and movement, or cinphilia and fetishism. One of the most interesting accounts is Laura Mulvey’s thought-provoking book, Death 24 x a Second (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), especially her concluding chapters on the possessive and pensive spectator. Raymond Bellour has been our most brilliant observer of these shifts and transformations of spectatorship with respect to photography, cinema, and video in an electronic and digital age. See his recently translated collection of essays, Between-the-Images (Zurich and Dijon: JRP | Ringier and Les presses du réel, 2012).
confounds an image with what it is an image of. ‘But even so . . .’, and here
knowledge rotates into belief. To enjoy the fiction and partake of its plea-
sures – or in the case of photography, to maintain belief in past existence (and
perhaps to ward off knowledge of the passing of existence) – the spectator
must displace or transform this knowledge. Metz concludes here, having
glossed Mannoni’s argument at length in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’. Still, as
I have tried to argue, his essay on ‘Photography and Fetish’ suggests many
interesting new points of departure from his earlier work. In particular, it
is important to insist that what I have characterized as perceptual belief
is not a form of illusion nor should it be diagnosed as fantasy. Rather, it is
another form of knowledge that has both ethical and philosophical force.
This is where a comparison with Cavell becomes both apt and illustrative
and perhaps deepens our understanding of these two important thinkers
despite their superficial differences.

One might say that Metz’s arguments present a diagnosis or symptomol-
ogy of the fetishistic character of perceptual belief. Cavell targets a similar
condition and experience of perceptual belief in his ontological and ethical
investigations of the logic of scepticism. Where Freud is the protagonist (or
antagonist) of Metz’s argument, Cavell implicitly targets Descartes as the
foil for his investigations of the sceptical character of belief in photography
or cinematography. Descartes is the antagonist in this story for several
reasons. Cartesianism places epistemology as the centrepiece of philosophy,
and in so doing makes perception the guarantor of knowledge about the
world. At the same time, Descartes knows that human perception is limited
and therefore unreliable. One last dilemma must be added to this linking
of acts of perceiving to the quest for certainty in knowledge: existence.
In Descartes’ Meditations, the instability of knowing is linked to possible
failures of perception and judgment that are at once outward- and inward-
directed. Sitting alone before the fire in his study, Descartes is lulled into
wondering, as we all sometimes are, whether I am awake or dreaming, and
suddenly fearing that the frontiers between these two states are indiscern-
ible or indistinguishable. What makes such thoughts all the more disturbing
is that doubts about the existence of the world lead inexorably to doubts
about the reliability of the self and its anchoring in a stable, perceptible,
and knowable world, as well as about the power of any transcendental
authority to assure the universal coherence and meaningfulness of the
world. In a strong sense, one could portray Descartes as the founding author
of the experience of modernity in its doubled aspect: presenting the self as
divided from the world by its capacities for perception and thought, and thus
wishing for the self to master both itself and the world, and all the objects in it, by assuring their existence through criteria of certain knowledge.

Scepticism is another aspect or dimension of modernity, in that the desire for certainty is a response to a perceived precariousness of one’s relation to the world, as if a sudden and unexpected dislocation of the subject from the object of knowledge. The unacknowledged symptom of scepticism, what Cavell sometimes calls the truth of scepticism, is suppressing recognition that it produces the situation it is supposed to overcome. (This would be another point of contrast and comparison with the logic of fetishism.) In diverse moments of writing, Cavell describes this condition as the difficulty of making ourselves present to the world, and the world present to us. In its response to scepticism, epistemology creates a new and potentially disquieting situation that Cavell pictures as seeing ourselves as outside the world as a whole. (And here one might also entertain comparisons with Metz’s discussions of voyeurism.) The self is thus constrained to relate to the world as if ontologically distinct from it. Moreover, since perception is optically unreliable, the self or mind are made distinct from the body, even if the only way of relating to the world is through the frame or window of perception, as if from an immaterial and partial perspective looking out at different aspects of external objects.

In this situation, the character of the subject and the character of the world are both transformed. The world is fashioned here as what Cavell calls a ‘generic object’, in contrast, perhaps, to the fetish as a partial object; that is, as something that epistemology can treat in its generality as indistinguishable from all the singular and particular things within the world, or alternatively, where singular things serve pars pro toto as tokens of the world as a knowable object. In its need to know the world as a complete object, scepticism expresses an anxiety that Cavell presents in The Claim of Reason as ‘a sense of powerlessness to know the world, or to act upon it; I think it is also working in the existentialist’s (or, say, Santayana’s) sense of the precariousness and arbitrariness of existence, the utter contingency in the fact that things are as they are’.16

In this context, Cavell’s early definition of cinema as a ‘succession of automatic world projections’, which I discuss at length in The Virtual Life of Film, also suggests a programme of philosophical investigation that links the temporality of modernism to the ‘movement’ or transformative power

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of the image. Succession indicates types and degrees of depicted motion, of course, both within the frame and across continuous or discontinuous series at various scales. Yet this criterion should also be broadened to include the complex temporalities of the image in its states and phases of becoming. Automatic designates those aspects of the image that are self-producing independent of a human hand, as well as the absence of people and things so produced on the screen. Call this the inhuman dimension or power of screened worlds, which may also be characterized as the passive intentional power of cinematographic expression. World then leads to ontological investigations of the worlds and subjects so made, and the interpenetrating qualities of reality and fantasy experienced through institutional conditions of viewing and response. And finally, projection signals the phenomenological conditions of viewing, as if at a remove or distance from the world, as well as the force of analogy in movement and time between the screened world and the pro-filmic world thus transcribed and projected. Movement, time, and becoming are all complexly linked here, in ways expressive of the unsettled and unsettling force of fantasy and reality (of fantasies of reality, or the reality of fantasy in relation to screened worlds), as well as the passing or becoming of ontological situations thus projected.

In the first phase of Cavell’s film-philosophy, the problem of ontology does not wish just to account for the existence of the projected world and perception as screened. Rather, Cavell wants to ask: what are the conditions of my current existence that lead me to desire to see and to experience the world in just this way, as projected and screened? Why does just this kind of picturing of the world hold me? What are the sources of its attraction or attractiveness? These questions are ethical and express a philosophical desire as a psychological one. Cinema itself responds to this question by offering another regime of belief, not necessarily as an escape into fantasy but rather by offering a condition or situation wherein we might understand more clearly how our views of or on reality are burdened by fantasy. This is neither an escape into or out of fantasy, as if somehow our thoughts, perceptions, and expressions could be disconnected from our desires. The screened world is a perfect emblem of scepticism, as I have already pointed out in The Virtual Life of Film, but it also opens to view a range of options for relief from scepticism. And not by bolstering our knowledge of things, not by documenting our certainty of the world either present or past, but by opening to question dilemmas of belief or disbelief framed by a mode of

17 See D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), especially pp. 2-73.
existence that desires these kinds of pictures of the world; or alternatively, by examining the forms of our responsiveness to a world that wants us to experience it as or through projected moving pictures.

Cavell’s version of ontology is transformational. When Cavell in a 1978 essay asks what becomes of things (or people) on film, he wants us to comprehend the world viewed as projected on the screen as a space of transformation or, if you will, becoming. Cavell calls this force of becoming on screen and as image ‘photogenesis’. These transformations do not only count for objects recorded and transformed to the screen but also for the subjects included there. In his first accounts leading up to *Pursuits of Happiness*, these subjects are ethical exemplars responding to sceptical belief, usually in comic ways; or in fact, finding such belief to be comic rather than tragic. The figures of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, or Cary Grant are especially important in this context, not to mention the great actresses of remarriage comedy. Becoming on the screen is a species of (self-)transformation, meaning that it is both automatic or subject to certain automatisms of recording, transcription, narration, and genre, and also that it projects reflexively a picture of self responding to pressures of transformation. (Cavell often refers to this process as the ascendancy of actor over character in cinema.)

Ontology in Cavell’s sense is therefore not about an attained existence for either objects or persons, which film is then capable of recording, representing, or preserving, nor is it about the preservation or projection of the world as a generic object. The temporal structure of screened worlds and the ethical stakes for our picture of subjectivity so projected are more complex. To understand the concept of ontology as expressing film’s relation to reality and thus fantasy, Cavell asks us to investigate the reality of this relation through moving images as images that move us.

Take, for example, Cavell’s discussion of the comedy of Buster Keaton in ‘What Becomes of Things on Film?’ Cavell frames his response to Keaton through Heidegger’s characterization of the worldhood of the world announcing itself to us, not as a revelation to the subject but rather through the obstinacy of things, which in opposing us expose the limitations of our acts, knowledge, and preoccupations in our encounters and struggles with material objects. The resistance of the world to our actions and our will not only circumscribes us as subjects – if we are willing, it also opens us sensuously to so far unrecognized textures and capacities of the world, and to our contingent relationships to it as a space of accidents, which are also unforeseen possibilities. In slapstick comedy, every mischance is a gift and an opportunity for evasion. That this occurs in the time and movements of cinema, Cavell explains, says something about
the human capacity for sight, or for sensuous awareness generally, something we might express as our condemnation to project, to inhabit, a world that goes essentially beyond the delivery of our senses [...]. I understand Buster Keaton, say in *The General* [Clyde Bruckman & Buster Keaton, USA 1926] to exemplify an acceptance of the enormity of this realization of human limitation, denying neither the abyss that at any time may open before our plans, nor the possibility, despite that open possibility, of living honorably, with good if resigned spirits, and with eternal hope. His capacity for love does not avoid this knowledge, but lives in full view of it. Is he dashing? He is something rarer; he is undashable. He incorporates both the necessity of wariness in an uncertain world, and also the necessary limits of human awareness; gaze as we may, there is always something behind our backs, room for doubt.  

These comments are not a defense of stoicism. The personae of Keaton or Chaplin do not ask that we gracefully accept the obstinacy of fate and the world but rather show that human beings are resourcefully capable of pursuing happiness in spite of these limitations. The comic responses of Keaton or Chaplin to the world’s contingency and obstinacy are extraordinary manifestations of what any ordinary human being is capable of. Cavell calls this a willingness to care, or to be attentive to the depth of a human capacity for inventiveness and improvisation in seeking out newly imagined alternatives.

Here the link between reality and fantasy in the screened image is especially important. Or rather, it may be characteristic of the automatisms of the screened image that every transcription of the world is also expressive of a desired stance towards the world – the world as we want to see it or desire it to be. The real and the imaginary are not opposed here as genres of cinematographic expression. Rather, they continually flow into and out of one another in the temporality of the projected image and our responses to it. Cavell calls this an alternation between indicative and subjunctive moods, or unmarked juxtapositions of reality with some unresolved opposition to reality. In ‘What Becomes of Things on Film?’, Cavell evokes the term *photogenesis* to describe the image’s peculiar quality of becoming, which is also expressive of ‘the power of film to materialize and to satisfy (hence to dematerialize and to thwart) human wishes that escape the satisfaction of

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FETISHISM AND SCEPTICISM

the world as it stands; as perhaps it will ever, or can ever, in fact stand’. To speak of ontology here is to address not only or not simply a fact of film, as Cavell might put it, but also to focus on a genetic capacity of the image that needs to be interpreted or evaluated in terms of its qualities of attraction.

At various moments in this period of his writing, Cavell asserts that film is a moving image of scepticism. To answer the question ‘what becomes of things and people on film’ means comprehending all the variety and complexity of what ‘movement’ means here, in ways that are analogous to Metz’s comments on the transformations of stillness by movement in cinematography. We certainly find cinematographic images to be moving, that is, as inspiring affect or emotion. But they are also unsettling; they make us ontologically unquiet. If film is a moving image of scepticism, it does not so much confirm our subjectivity (as modern for example) as shake our belief that we know the basis of our conviction in reality. This unsettling of belief is similar to Metz’s account of fetishism and its varying manifestations in relation to photography and cinema, though Cavell is pushing here in other directions, in that in his account movement is also ethically transformational. In cutting conviction loose from its moorings, the subject is made vulnerable to pressures of uncertainty, doubt, and self-questioning and thus open to the possibility of change. And finally, movement is also historical: the passage of scepticism into art or cinema, from the everyday or philosophy into a mode or machine of presentation may also mean that modernity is changing the terms of its existence, as I already argued in Part Two of The Virtual Life of Film. (Here we pass, perhaps, from an experience of modernity to nostalgia for it, or what Cavell calls losing one’s natural relation to art or film.)

The concept of photogenesis plays an interesting role in the first phase of Cavell’s thought. For Cavell, photogenesis names one of the principal powers or automatisms of cinematographic presentations, where the transcription and projection of screened worlds enacts transformations whose violence is commensurate with the force of becoming immanent to thought and things on film. The concept of photogenesis is complexly linked here to cinema’s specific institutional presentation of the sceptical dilemma. For example, in the Foreword to the enlarged edition of The World Viewed, Cavell writes that objects projected on the film screen are inherently reflexive or self-referential, meaning first that one is led to wonder about their physical origins in past times and spaces, but also that the quality of their presence on the screen indicates their ineluctable absence. This situation is

19 Ibid., p. 6.
an emblem of scepticism in that all we need to convince ourselves of the presence of the world is a projected image wherein the world is screened and we are screened from it, as if viewing it from a distance.

Belief in the causal presence of objects on the screen, and our surrender of responsibility for that world to film's automatic transcriptions and projections of it, is one of the satisfactions of scepticism. But the anguish of scepticism is also produced from this situation in two ways, both of which signify a withdrawal or diminution of human agency and autonomy. In viewing this succession of automatic world projections, we are absolved from responsibility for producing views of the world, since another automatic or automatizing (nonhuman) entity has brought them into being.

Cavell's characterization of the expressive powers of the image is not a realism, or not only a realism in a limited sense. The reality of the condition of cinematic viewing, according to Cavell, is ineluctably marked by fantasy, and in turn fantasy is one of the most powerful components of our experience of reality through cinema. This experience is neither the illusion of reality nor the reality-effect so thoroughly studied by contemporary film theory. Rather, it relates to Cavell's close connection of the sceptical dilemma to the experience of modernity in cinematic viewing. There is a powerful reality expressed in this situation since it is the philosophical background of our daily cultural life in modernity – the experience of cinema is a component of that life and also an expression of it. But the reality of this experience is also permeated by fantasy (of belief or conviction, of a world accessible only through the senses, of a past preserved against time, of a self withdrawn into privacy) as a force of attraction inseparable from our lived reality. In philosophy, this situation is not to be negated, overcome, or deconstructed but rather acknowledged and evaluated. The challenge of ontological investigation is not to alter our conditions of knowing but rather our conditions of valuing and living. The photographic and cinematic arts have a special role to play here because they embody and replicate the structure of scepticism, and also because they so powerfully inspire a hesitancy or equivocation with respect to scepticism's powers of conviction, which according to Cavell is inherent in the structure of scepticism itself. In other words, photography both elicits a certain regime of belief and also destabilizes it.

This assertion and destabilization of belief is, again, beautifully expressed in Cavell's statement in *The World Viewed* that 'A photograph does not present us with “likenesses” of things; it presents us, we want to say, with the things themselves. But wanting to say that may well make us ontologically
restless.” Here, Cavell wants to describe the powers of photogenesis simultaneously to affirm belief and inspire doubt, to attract us to the image as confirming the existence of the world through its powers of automatic analogical causation, and at the same time, to enact a fantasy of the world’s presence through its absent existence. This is another way of asserting that the automatic transcription and projection of the world hovers uncertainly between indicative and subjunctive moods, or a co-present belief of past existence in time and of a world preserved, and the present projection of a world transformed. We misrecognize photography’s hold on us if we gravitate too urgently to one pole or the other. Rather, the truth of the image, if there is one, resides in its uncertainty, contingency, and becoming.

Cavell’s concept of automatism is therefore not meant to describe, or not only to describe, the fact of mechanical reproduction; it also wants to account for the powers of attraction or fantasy in relation to images so produced in ways both human and inhuman. Automatism thus manifests a specific kind of desire – the wish to view the world unseen and as if by a self hidden behind perception – and this world must be taken to be the world in its totality. This is the modern philosophical wish of scepticism, whose desire for the world as a completely knowable object places it just beyond the reach of our knowing and so produces a situation where our natural mode of perception is viewing as an invisible and anonymous observer. Here, Cavell explains, ‘We do not so much look at the world as look out at it, from behind the self.’ This is a precise description of the perceptual and epistemological situation of scepticism, which seems to want to make the self distinct from perception.

In cinema, this perception appears to be produced independently of the self as an automatic instrumentality. The sceptical attitude thus engenders a peculiar internal division where the mind can only assure itself of the possibility of knowledge by treating its own perception as a separate mechanism that intervenes between itself and the world. At the same time, this mode projects an external division separating self from world, whose only points of contact can take place through acts of viewing. Perception thus becomes both a structure of separation between subject and object, mind and world, and also the only pathway through which mind and world can communicate. In the thrall of scepticism, Cavell suggests, the only way of establishing connection with the world is through viewing it or having views of it. To wish to view the world itself – as it was in the past or is in the present

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20 Cavell, The World Viewed, p. 17.
21 Ibid., p. 102.
past – as a complete causally produced object is therefore to wish for the condition of viewing as such, but in the passive form of an automatic and instrumentalized perception. In turn, to wish for the condition of viewing as such is to desire a sure connection to the world but also to hold at bay, unseen and unacknowledged, recognition that this desire is a fantasy of anonymity, privacy, and power over the world. In theatrical cinema, the deepest irony of this situation is that the condition of collective viewing and of shared experience might reinforce our desire for the privacy and anonymity of scepticism. (Perhaps the contemporary proliferation of home viewing and personal data screens might likewise reinforce and expand exponentially an isolation where our only recourse for connecting to the world or to others is through the image and from behind screens. In this ontology we are not alone together, but rather together alone.) Alternatively, philosophical investigation and criticism might be able to release the hold of this fantasy or to let us see beyond it the attractions of sociality and a shared mode of existence waiting to be acknowledged.

Cavell and Metz both offer us explanations of the attractions and paradoxes of perceptual belief but from distinctly different perspectives: on the one hand, a psychoanalytically grounded semiology; on the other, a philosophical ethics. In this respect, perhaps the comparison of Cavell and Metz from the standpoint of ontology is unjust. Ever the semiologist, Metz examines photography and film as socialized units of meaning or reading, where in his later essay on ‘Photography and Fetishism’, fetishism becomes more a heuristic model than a psychological explanation. Cavell gives a philosophical account of this experience, where in a number of essays the ontology of photography and film are read as emblematic of the problem of scepticism and its overcoming. Nevertheless, the common interest in the problematic nature of belief links Metz and Cavell’s arguments across a number of common themes that present opportunities for comparison and contrast of their two perspectives: the transformative powers of movement and projection; the existential force of indexicality or causality in analogical reproduction; the association of photography with the domestic or private and family life – what Metz calls ‘the presumed real’\(^{22}\) – and film with collective reception and an imaginary referent; the curious alternation of presence and absence in space and in time articulated in different ways by photography and cinematography; and finally and most importantly, the critical investigation of the co-constitutive and indiscernible vacillation

\(^{22}\) Metz, ‘Photography and Fetish’, p. 82.
between reality and fantasy, or the real and the imaginary, in perceptual belief.

We might compare the two perspectives by calling upon our own ordinary cultural experience as viewers, and I would guess that many of us would find much to recommend in both accounts. However, I want to conclude here with some observations on method or critical practice inspired by the juxtaposition of Metz and Cavell as they examine respectively the claims that photographic or cinematographic perceptual belief make on us.

In *Elegy for Theory*, I suggest that we think of the problem of the history of film theory not as fixed and successive periods, or conceptual schemes overturning and replacing one another, but rather as overlapping and intersecting genres of discourse full of retentions, returns, and unexpected extensions, as well as ellipses and omissions. Nevertheless, the emergence or unfolding of discursive genres, one out of the other, occurs neither progressively nor continuously but rather in series of disruptions and discontinuities that mark real differences, each of which involve turnings and remappings of concepts of theory. Moreover, I hint at the end of *Elegy for Theory* that in film study, and perhaps the arts and humanities in general, a moment has arrived where contemporary theory reaches its end.

From this perspective, when examined genealogically, ‘theory’ can only be presented as what Wittgenstein calls an intermediate case. There is a virtual life of theory no less powerful or elusive than that of film. We will never settle on a satisfactory definition of theory, even though one of the attractions of theory may be to demand just this satisfaction from us. I have suggested throughout this essay that Metz’s approach is theoretical and that Cavell’s is philosophical. Perhaps the moment has finally arrived, then, to state clearly that despite their jagged and irregular borders, and all of the seams or edges that both link and separate them like the ocean meeting the land, both reaching over and withdrawing from it, philosophy is not theory. Philosophy may overlap with and link to many problems of theory, yet my comparison of Metz and Cavell also suggests that it remains distinct from theory as a practice.

One way to characterize theory might be as an activity wherein experience is converted into thought, and so made expressible and communicable to others. Along these lines one might also say that theory is outward-directed while philosophy is inward-directed. Theory’s primary activity is explanation. Theories designate or refer to an object, which they hope to describe completely and whose effects they wish to account for or explain.

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In its generality, this definition counts as much for the criticism of art as it does for investigations of the natural world. Alternatively, in turning to art and other forms of human inventiveness, philosophy expresses knowledge of our selves and our relations with others. Art provokes in philosophy self-referring inquiries and evaluations of our ways of being and styles of existence. Here, interpretation and evaluation are always turning one over the other as mutually amplifying activities. This is why in my latest book I refer to philosophy as artful conversation. The style of philosophical expression is ontological and moral or ethical more than it is epistemological. And in turn, philosophy is a practice of styling the self and of projecting a world, no matter how unattainable, where that self might find new expression.

Here the two forms of explanation might indeed present themselves as two different worlds. Film theories are ‘about’ film – they take or even construct films as objects of knowledge. They propose explanatory concepts – for example, Metz’s appeal to fetishism as a heuristic concept – to examine what film is (and these concepts will give us many competing definitions) and to explain its logics and effects. Here one presumes the empirical existence and history of the object and its effects, and the activities of theory are dependent on our sense of this object, whether aesthetic or psychological.

Alternatively, philosophy turns to film to examine and clarify problems and concepts that are of concern to philosophy. Paradoxically, this means that a (film) philosophy is not necessarily a part of film studies; rather, it belongs to philosophy alone. Philosophy explains nothing ‘about’ film. However, it might have a lot to say about why and how film and the arts matter to us, why we value them, and how we try to make sense of ourselves and the world with and through them, for example, through attention to the experience of perceptual belief. It may even want to examine our ‘theories’ of film to test their conditions of sense.

If a philosophical reading returns to film or literary studies some fact or insight regarding the nature or history of the medium and its meanings and effects, it is in the form of a gift. Here, philosophy overlaps with or contributes to theory, perhaps, but it does not become, for all that, a theory of film or art or literature. Perhaps we should reserve for theory epistemological inquiries into the nature of things, matters, and causes? Theory would be epistemological and empirical, then, in diverse and open senses of the concept. And here Christian Metz is one of the greatest exemplars of the practice of theory in the postwar period. Still, there is a point where philosophy and theory touch or find a common join: where in examining an object we also evaluate the conditions and styles of knowing, limits as
well as possibilities, that confront us in efforts, successful or not, toward knowing. For Cavell, this critical capacity defines the difficulty of philosophy as well as its particular strength, which Cavell himself characterizes as receiving ‘inspiration for taking thought from the very conditions that oppose thought, as if the will to thought were as imperative as the will to health and to freedom’. The possibility of thinking – or better, critical thinking – should also be a potential pursuit of happiness. And happily, both Stanley Cavell and Christian Metz provide us with powerful directions whereby we may investigate how moving images move us, and move us to thought.

About the author

D.N. Rodowick is the Glen A. Lloyd Distinguished Service Professor in the Division of the Humanities at the University of Chicago. He is the author, most recently, of The Virtual Life of Film (2007), Elegy for Theory (2014), and Philosophy’s Artful Conversation (2014), all published by Harvard University Press. Rodowick is also a curator and an award-winning experimental filmmaker and video artist. With Victor Burgin, he was recently awarded a Mellon Collaborative Fellowship at the University of Chicago’s Richard and Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry to produce a new video work, Overlay.
