

Rights of Passage:
An Aesthetic Cultivation of Contingency

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ABSTRACT**Rights of Passage: An Aesthetic Cultivation of Contingency****Trevor Mowchun**

The connections between creativity, contingency and necessity, loosely with respect to modernism, have a peculiar if not puzzling way of hinging on the nature of moving images and the experience of being still while beholding them, one after another. If we accept, after T.J. Clark, that contingency “is an issue of representation [and] not empirical life-chances,” then contingency can emerge as a historical process in which representation can be seen to adapt to various crises of meaning by becoming more and more susceptible to meaninglessness. The medium of the moving image along with the passive position required of its spectators is here understood as offering a kind of formal invitation to contingency, giving it a permanent place in the realm of hermeneutics in the form of a symbolic threat against the powers of human agency. The primary objective of this thesis is to raise the stakes of contingency within modern aesthetics and demonstrate some ways in which the plight of contingency can become the purpose of subjectivity and hence the very medium of self-realization.

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Introduction

An Autobiography of Ideas

“What is the idea *behind* the idea?” Jacques Derrida, in a documentary on the philosopher/professor, very casually puts this question to a student struggling to articulate, in a few simple sentences, the original seeds of her research. Her inability to respond, quickly and sincerely, and the sight of her distress over not knowing where to begin as if she had completely forgotten her reasons for beginning, got me wondering about why it is such tricky business to think or write or act in accordance with our deepest motivations. Why is the concept of motive localized somewhere beneath intention, visualized perhaps as the motor or fuel of intention, and consequently veiled by the concept of human action when it remains the very cause of what we do and why and to what end? Is it the case that the commencing of some action necessarily conceals an awareness of the motive it is meant to carry out? And if so, does it become the “conspiracy” of action that motivation is to be completely swallowed up and forgotten by the time the fruits of our labor are ready to be reaped? Such questions began to fill and even cloud my mind as I started to realize that what little basis I had for acknowledging the idea behind the ideas in the following essays was primarily by way of a direct appeal to the ideas comprising them, swimming on the surface of thought as it were. This underlying idea seems for precisely this reason – this limitation of action – to be all the more important to uncover and constitute through a process of critical backtracking because I only started writing with a bigger picture in mind after each part – each fact of an unbeknownst whole – had been more or less sketched out, with identities as opposed

to destinies more or less determined. My task, as I saw it close to a year ago by now, was not to hatch new ideas but rather to take care of those I already had by following a sneaking suspicion that these three essays composed in this particular order brought to fruition an idea “behind” ideas I was too busy working through – as if living and breathing – to tap the root of my own motivation.

I have yet to read a single book by Derrida, but I suspect that my reaction to his question at least points in the direction of what I take him to mean when he takes writing, or a specific mode and mood of it, as the work of mourning (for departed friends and times and causes alike). It was my first instinct to set the stage here by looking down as if I had reached the end of a journey whose tracks lay safely behind me and, from a vantage so high and a stance so still, could only then begin to account for the logic of my chosen path. But, as I weigh the consequences of having begun on three separate occasions an investigation whose logic I was only half aware, it seems presumptuous, even unruly, to cast myself here as all-knowing from the outset or as someone who had consciously set out with a neatly arranged itinerary of questions (or theses) and plans for possible solutions. Since I did not properly or conventionally begin, I feel I can’t in good conscience create the impression in this introduction that I did (through, say, succinct declarations of introductory signatures such as topic, scope, prevailing discourses and cultural import). For what it’s worth, I did, however, begin at the end, in the quiet wake of a reprieve (when the work was more or less over, more or less set in stone, hence more or less abandoned to its particular fate), which I took as an occasion to consolidate my investigations by looking *back* instead of down – back being the only direction with a

view I could actually take without succumbing to a belated, self-fulfilling type of authority.

A big part of what this thesis is about is therefore tied to how its parts came to appear in the light of a whole. Retracing steps, going back for the full answer, is to shine such a light. But remarks like the following remain worrisome as mandates for articulation: “How can I know what I think until I’ve seen what I’ve said?” sounds a bit like an excuse, depending on the degree of rhetoric reached, and certainly can be used to excuse oneself from taking responsibility over one’s choice of expression. But it can also come as an honest confession that serves to remind all us listeners that those who speak are always a bit ahead of themselves as if sped up and separated by the moving vehicle of language. A real question then emerges from this predicament of a possibility: “How can I know what I think so as to see, foresee, what I will say?” If saying does in fact run the risk of outrunning thinking, then perhaps one way for our thinking to catch up and grab the reins of our speech is by choosing to speak about something *already said*. That is what I am going to try here by documenting a train of thought I’m no longer on, sketching the succession of conceptual landscapes (or fields) through which I passed, gradually and near seamlessly it seems, so that no transition will appear “in order” (causally and necessarily) in accordance with some preconceived logical design. Which isn’t to say the path lacks logic altogether – indeed I’m surprised to find just how much logic is actually binding – only that it was not administered upon the inquiry until after the fact, which is now, and hence too late to determine the structure of the investigation. Because of that (facts coming after the fact) it is never too late (for it is also our right) to interpret the logic of events and appropriate them as our own through storytelling.

Indeed, telling stories is how we reconcile ourselves with events in which our participation was so full on, sometimes to the point of blinding, that they may as well have been entirely out of our own hands. And matters of the mind, I wish to stress, are no less “out of our hands” just because they seem to unfold within us, as if “the within” were the place or the point from which matters of life are most within our power to control.

Methodologically suspect? Perhaps, but not unsound. For all this could turn out to be ideal, and constructive in more ways than one, because it could prove to be an effective way to start acknowledging that what we say, regardless of the context, *is* (more than amounts to) what we think, on the simple condition that we come to as full a knowledge as possible of what *exactly* was said (despite all paradoxical efforts to take care of our ideas while in the process of having them, and then, if that weren’t enough of a challenge, figuring to what extent they have actually come from us). Just as writers, who cannot hope one day to make a clean break from what has been published in their name only, must be, at least in spirit, perpetual *rewriters* – the tellers of their own telling of tales.

When I first started to take up thinking with some thrill of seriousness, I would write down most of what came to me, no less the thoughts I tracked down, on tidily inconspicuous index cards fit for recipes, which I then with tremendous haste (perhaps in the form of an exhale) tossed into a shuffled nest of notes rising high (and collecting dust) in a shoebox. This fragmentary and highly elliptical approach to writing strikes me now as being so extreme for denying the various instances of thought any access to their very

own context, each entry making a premature appeal to its own autonomy as if seduced by the glamour of the quotation. It has been almost two years since I scribbled my last card, the cause of which is just as traceable to the time and attention I now grant the “full” sheet of paper (with its vain but humbling spaciousness and successiveness). Now if any good has come from this newfound unwillingness to relish and feel satisfied with the very fast and small, it is having the pleasure (often at the expense of my great embarrassment) to fish down into these depths and feed on those thoughts that somehow managed to survive the famine. Slightly condensed, I include here the fragment which, I suppose, started my interest in and concern for *beginnings*, marking not only my first reflection on the idea of the beginning but constituting as good an exemplification of how I used to begin:

A strange view. Upright in a chair, eyes down and stiff as rock, and a frame of mind sequestering my immediacy like a perimeter. Is it little more than a coincidence while trying to put one’s mind to work and think of something relevant to write to stumble upon such a frequently glossed familiarity: *frame of mind*? Where is the sense in such an outlandish personification that compels such confidence, indeed which leads me to believe that it is more or less accurate? In the style of Cartesian introspection, let us take this one here, this mind that has turned to itself for its picture. A practical but conventional and hence somewhat arbitrary period of cognitive stoppage and substitution – where “mind” and “I” align and become identical, where the full body of the self resurfaces and starts to dry – is a fair approximation of this impact of the “I” on my “me,” so to speak. In this way the mind is thrust back on itself to consider its powers of framing: we

can be seen from our own point of view angling out, protruding, standing on end, backs against the door, adjusting and focusing ourselves in relation to particulars internal and external and in between. But I cannot quite determine now whether I'm framing contemplation or contemplating framing. Which one is the metaphor or less metaphorical? Perhaps the reason for this wild indiscernibility is that *both* get framed as the metaphors multiply and start to meld, creating out of thinnest air a peculiarly mental and paradoxically expanding claustrophobia as I encroach upon what it is to begin.

The digression closed as quickly and sharply as its sudden arrival. I would never have expected that this passing thought about the gesture of the mind's posture of framing would return in the form of a clue, as potential guidance for the urgency to find a way to backtrack from the end for the sake of reclaiming the shifting ground on which acts of beginning can go either way – that is, any number of ways – while still being their own essentially unique and fixed way “in.”

Who begins, why, and from where? We could say that everyone begins at least once and does so (each to their own) because time doesn't, *time* being the word for that which never has, for people and places preceding us immeasurably, and upon which our manifold myths of origin are projected. We all officially began once (it is true), but we can't remember. Right now we are not the same person who once began and who began as of there. We, in our present moment, are without a beginning, stranded with the knowledge that we began without meaning to. So who is “beginning” all the time; who are the beginners who aspire to rebirth themselves – consciously, carefully, perhaps conscientiously – on their own terms? Those who come to mind are the positively and

strategically dissatisfied. Anyone with the will (even if it should disguise the need) to constitute their existence as an alternative to the one dealt out: existence held as the advantage of having been dealt an unfinished enigma whose fixed parameters of birth and death are merely practical and conditioned and contingent in their moments, leaving open the creative possibility of beginning and ending. The beginning is therefore a happy time because that is what it promises, that is what it is on the verge of. But this time is not necessarily the sort that ticks: when a beginning is at last initiated, the complex promise is fulfilled to the best of the abilities of the aspirant in defiance. One is supposed to be happy in the comfort of this private here-and-now, but to begin anew, on top of beginning at the bottom, is also to begin alone.

In the history of aesthetics, the concept of the beginning, to say nothing of the experience of beginning, is inseparable from the expropriation of art from its service to the divine, particularly during the time of early Greek civilization. Now that art has gradually lost (or found) its way within its own emancipation, the artist can no longer receive from art and audience that destiny of representation to build for the divine (or a metaphysical absolute) an architecture of the human. Thus Giorgio Agamben can speak of the modern artist as “the man without content,”¹ in acknowledgment of the disappearance (or death) of any aesthetic content whose nature is intrinsic (vital) to the nature of art as Man’s primary dimensional form. The arbitrariness of content – what I will soon be calling the contingency of content – stemming from the newfound questioning of content (and the consequent possibility of ever new and incommensurate contents) results in a kind of paradigmatic shift across the ontological hierarchy of

¹ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, California: Tanford University Press, 1999).

aesthetics from content to form, and from objectivity to subjectivity within the hierarchy of consciousness, with *form* emerging as the only “content” capable of constituting unanimous criteria for artistic production and, theoretically speaking, justifying art. But since this content is nothing but form, a form defined precisely by the lack of any intrinsic (again vital) content to modern consciousness, the artist is without an impetus, or calling, that is not the unmistakable sound of his or her own secret appeal to be summoned to the task of inspiration (and for reasons as potentially wide-ranging as the subject matter chosen). The blank slate (canvas) of thought – the beginning of artistic creation as the chance to venture independently and simultaneously with the help or guidance of the most secular deity in chance itself – becomes the most succinct image and monolithic testament of the death of the absolute. Because there is absolutely nothing that the artist ought to put there in the name of art, everything that has been put there before, including everything that he has put there himself, including all that entered his consciousness within a culture that can disseminate information much faster than it can proliferate it, is in some sense built into the very fabric of possibility, rendering possibility into a structure of the infinitely meaningful and chance into the possibility of discovering or stumbling upon structures of significance untouched by any established system of signs or recognizable modes of consciousness. There is then nothing inherently at stake in the work of art except those raised in honor of work itself, that is, of production (Agamben uses the more formal concept of *praxis*). But there is no way to create *those* stakes – stakes which shadow the work itself and not what it is a work *of* – except by beginning the work by getting to work, for the ontological absence of stakes triggers the subjective but also practical ordering of them. The very act of beginning,

then, is the creation or forging of those absent stakes at the moment that the work's content, founded on a *principle* of nothingness, is helpless to escape from them. In this sense we can say, albeit reservedly, that the work of art *depends* on its beginning rather than stems from it, which is why it is a fundamental ambition of artists to contend and overcome the beginning (a great departure from their prior power/burden to cultivate it in a dignified servitude) so that they can pursue this fascinating residual known as "limits" (endless and errant in the absence of any objectively authoritative measure). And it is this sense of the coinciding of endlessness and error into a destiny of drift that is peculiar to the "foundationlessness" of art as a second or alternate world – call it a banished world or the banishing of the world – a "world" that we have, according to Nietzsche, so that we do not go under on account of truth.² The modern subject, particularly and most blatantly in the role of the artist, can thus often be found standing atop the highest peak within the wide range of truth, too high to discern the difference between those which are necessary from those which are contingent, contingency taken in its traditional philosophical sense as that which is possible but ultimately unnecessary.³

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), #822, p. 435.

³ Nietzsche's aphoristic style (or flourish) is a poetic expression of this freedom to hover over all things potentially integral to life. Though the stakes raised by the potentiality of such things (as potential truths) has the unpredictable power of wielding a special gravity over the speculative soul because there is no way to know how deep they go – the extent of their necessity – until one has honed in and touched down. The lightness which allows consciousness to take flight when it pleases and hover in speculation leaves it ironically quite vulnerable to the trappings of doctrine (traps Nietzsche perhaps sets for himself so as to skirt all the more in stride). It would appear, then, that the real danger with being lured or taken down by the "business" of truth is that one might end up becoming passionate about only those things which require unbridled devotion, however fleetingly felt. The artist, Nietzsche might say, requires utmost devotion, but only with respect to the truth of his art and not art as truth (assuming he knows *and believes* in the difference).

My retrospective understanding of this somewhat reawakened interest in beginnings is thus of a perceived intuition of a potentially significant link with the concept of contingency. The more I thought about beginnings, read with a mind to beginnings, and remembered my own experiences trying to begin (some of which strike me now as almost desperate attempts to overstep it), the more I came to see that beginners who acknowledge the force of contingency within the beginning – taking in the air of immanent and impending chance – increase the stakes of the beginning, the easier but more costly it is to begin and, in turn, the harder but more critical it is to reach an end. It appeared that the only factor greater than these stakes is the odds, and whether or not there is even a game. It also struck me that since the desire to speak or show can, very often, precede having something to say or reveal, the will to do so is closer to a mood – being in the mood to have will. And if the point of departure is selected through little more than a desire to depart, it is as though a dead end were already visible through the entrance to the maze, peculiarly obstructing the path to the first turn (after which the many divergences are sure to branch and tier and compete for priority). And this without changing the fact that the creative process is the best means of countering universal contingency at the same time as it proceeds (at the beginning) to affirm it.

The drama of modern art is in many ways describable as a battle against “the elements” of contingency or a battle fought on the field or “state” of contingency. The disorientation of a creative process lacking metaphysical roots is such that although it pursues a goal (perhaps more goals than it could ever keep track of, let alone achieve) it is nevertheless primed to set whatever mandate aside, or go so far as to abandon one altogether, for the sake of welcoming the guest of chance. Thus the sincerity of any goal-

oriented pursuit becomes a questionable motivation and phenomenon in artistic production because the stray autonomy of any medium, symptomatic we could say of the self-consciousness of art, obstructs or intercepts the fruition of the goal as a result of a radical shift in emphasis from *product* to *process*. The making of the work becomes not only more important than the work itself but the most defining characterization of the work, as if the process of making managed to switch places with the product made as a result of the modern conception of art finding its essence entirely within itself. What then is to prevent us from saying that what the artist is calling the “goal,” or what the work states as its “subject” or “underlying symbolic significance,” is nothing more than a front or an excuse, attempts to compensate for the negative or absent or contradictory criteria of art? If chance has replaced fate (or become fated) as the reigning criterion for the new (anti)absolute in an age where the devaluation of all values has left only that which is deemed necessary unscathed and hence invaluable, how could it wind up being inverted, that is, aesthetically set up and logically principled, and, pending that possibility, to what extent would it then function as a loophole back to the work of art’s privileged relationship to metaphysics? (Are we to understand the hyper-empirical sense of the metaphysical or a metaphysical vision in, say, the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, Michelangelo Antonioni and, more recently, Terrence Malick, Béla Tarr or Abbas Kiarostami in a negative light, the light of negation, so that the paradox of the pure necessity of contingency is resolved in their films through a committed deferral, at once both humble and proud, to a world (very often a natural world) that is resonantly true *only on the condition of its total lack of conditions*? The “disenchantment of nature” (which I take to refer to the historical moment when the necessity of nature became

perceptible as such, without the need for appeals to the super-sensory) does not appear to acquire any re-enchantment through the necessitation of contingency, but rather just the opposite seems to occur: the enchantment of contingency by way of necessitation, illuminating the fullness of that which is empty or overfull, by wiring it to the concept of *fate from the inside.*)

In *The Gay Science* (who familiar readers will have figured I have learned from and, in times of weakness, borrowed from) Nietzsche writes:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor Fati*: Let that be my love henceforth!⁴

The possibility of this connection between the discovery of beauty in necessity and the power to create beauty in the world is a significantly decisive albeit paradoxical one for the modern artist stuck with disenchantment. How can necessity, which commands reaction or even passivity towards itself as a fate, give way to creation, which commands necessity into an obedience to the will? This question, I believe, is at the heart of the thesis, literally and figuratively. Figuratively because it detects a secret tie or meeting place between necessity and contingency within the aesthetic; literally insofar as it comes up in the middle, halfway through the second chapter, marking a drastic turning point as contingency is released from the scene of the material world – extrapolated from the

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974), p. 223. He says this in the spirit of resolution on the opening day of the newest year, in January 1882, when he begins the fourth book of *The Gay Science* “Sanctus Januarius.” *Amor Fati* means “love of fate,” a concept vital to an understanding of his redemptive vision of nihilism.

facticity of cinematic representation – before turning in the direction of the modern subject. A starting hypothesis for the shift would go something like this: Necessity is stripped of its brutal command as the great sentencing-power of fate as soon as one sees that necessity is fundamentally contradicted the second one places a divine will (on old fate) at the helm of contingent circumstance, upon which necessity – all that comes to pass – “bends” to the will of he who opposes it by anthropomorphizing it. When necessity is made the object of revenge and fate taken hopelessly to task, the person who exacts it has typically cast himself in the role of victim, but only because he feels more victimized by his given humanity than by his very own struggle. Human limitation is as necessary as anything else that is bound to its particular and no less peculiar position – fixed into a form of life as Wittgenstein might say. A human being, despite the limits that form a life, is nevertheless a special case insofar as he can regard himself as an exception to them, that is, over and above and hence opposed to his existence as an *effect*. That a human being is a historical being means, among other things, that he has the double-edged freedom to reject or repress or praise and preserve so as to ultimately *choose* the history that he has no choice but to effectively embody.

A few words regarding the sharp polar fork of nihilism will allow me to pave the way for this reversal of necessity and creativity and provide some conceptual shape to its irrevocable aftermath. Strictly defined as the devaluation of all values, nihilism can have the power in the proper hands to ignite the opportunity for the reevaluation of value itself. The instructive ideal of it, to my understanding, is that we must come to value for itself everything that has been devalued out of refusal to value for what things are as opposed to what they are not. By directing our values away from necessity, hence away from

attitudes like acknowledgement and affirmation (Nietzsche wishes one day to be only a “Yes-sayer”⁵), we avoid crossing the sea of our greatest disappointment with human limitation and so remain at the edge of our very own waters of finitude. It is the secret mission of nihilism to discover necessity as ruthlessly as an archeologist would pursue a vestige regardless if it ennobles or degrades his or her image of the past civilization to which it belonged (and now represents). (That nihilism must start from scratch to discover what is the case is also the irony of nihilism – *where have we been living for so long until now?* – and the source of its volatility and self-destructiveness.) It seeks to accomplish this by questioning the values that have obscured necessity like layers of time, all values valued on the basis of the necessity unconditionally granted them, all values regarded and exploited as facts for one reason or another – in the unspoken name of compensation. But after it has completed its work, exposing the heart of all errancy, it discovers that it has ruined absolutely nothing or nothing *absolutely*, that the values brought down were only built out of air (out of, say, the narrative contents of a particular and no less given culture) and hence were indestructible because unquestionable or questionable at the catastrophic risk of exposing all facts as the fictions they more or less are. All that remains (so the argument goes) becomes all that there is, was, and will be, everything, all that there is to gain and to lose – nothing but the possibility of all things *to be*. Even chance becomes necessary according to the same principle as fate, because no principle is necessary anymore to distinguish them. Everything turns out (happily) to have value in itself prior to the valuing of one thing over another, of fantasy over reality and reality over fantasy; and since the discovery of necessity commits us metaphysically

⁵ Ibid.

to the indiscriminate valuing of all things, to the wild abandon of total affirmation, the act of knowing will take the form of an acknowledgement and hence, perhaps, also of an aesthetics. What this entails, at least in part, is that beyond not being able to value more than one thing at a time one way at a time, we also cannot cross the threshold of the thing valued, regardless of the way. Investigation, instantiation, argumentation . . . speculation, skepticism, loving affirmation . . . each in their own way, and with varying poignancy, will reinforce the very distance they span. But this is nothing to get too worried about. The value of something (a moral of the argument) should never be measured by its appearance of hiding or withholding or denying it, for the more it looks that way, giving the impression that its truth resides in hiding and is truthful because hidden, the more there is *in and not behind* the surface.

I mentioned film and some filmmakers earlier almost in passing. The connections I've been describing or narrating between creativity, contingency and necessity, loosely with respect to modernism, have a peculiar if not puzzling way of hinging on the ontology of moving images and the phenomenology of being still while beholding them, one after another, despite all sorts of efforts on behalf of maker and viewer alike to place them into meaningful succession and successions into blocks of seamless continuity. This part of the story is the hardest to tell without making a stretch, or to render convincing without being too insistent, but the substance of the claim I think is rather quite simple: If we accept, after T.J. Clark, that contingency "is an issue of representation [and] not empirical life-chances,"⁶ then contingency can emerge, first, as a historical process in which representation can be seen to adapt to various crises of meaning by becoming more

⁶ T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 11.

and more susceptible to meaninglessness and, second, as the last step representation had to take to reach its destination (destiny?) of totalization through an effacing amalgamation with the world represented. When film reached a point where it could “open its doors” to the world more widely (through automatic cameras and colour and the synchronization of sound) such that the world upon release (through various modes of projection) would not “know” where it is or if it had even “left” where it was – what it went through to appear again in the light of its own image – contingency in essence was offered a kind of formal and permanent invitation into the realm of hermeneutics in the form of a symbolic threat against the powers of human agency, which is to say that the non-human and the human became indistinguishable for the first time. As for a significant reference point for my own sense of this highly unique, perhaps grotesque aspect of film, I would look no further than a short passage from Stanley Cavell’s immeasurably resonant book on the ontology of film, *The World Viewed*:

Film takes our very distance and powerlessness over the world as the condition of the world’s natural appearance. It promises the exhibition of the world in itself.

This is its promise of candor: that what it reveals is entirely what is revealed to it, that nothing revealed by the world in its presence is lost.⁷

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 119. These remarks were written in the early 70’s, before movie cameras could be completely replaced by digital software on computers. I imagine that some people working exclusively within the field of film studies will take this fact to antiquate the philosophical consequences (and their fertile possibilities for the art of film) that Cavell unearths from a concept like “the world viewed” – viewing it from behind a camera, projecting it as light on a screen, screening it from viewers who find themselves on an opposite but similar side as those who filmed the world itself in all its glory. But I am not so convinced that the consequent claims are less relevant now than they were when they were put forth, that they have fallen out of synch with cinema

That film follows through on its promise not just perfectly but ontologically (assuming, of course, that it addresses enough of the world – existent or constructed or generated – for viewers to sense an invisible camera or some other invisibly mediating or “world-opening” device) is the sort of condition that makes the experience of film on the whole, all told, too much to bear. From the simplest one-take to the most complex narrative or avant-garde epic, moving images bear too much of the world – the one from which we are distant and over which we are powerless and about which we find overbearing – the world as we sometimes refuse to know it – and shows us what such distance and powerlessness as they occur in our everyday lives actually look like. Nowhere do I go so far as to claim that the viewer facing the screen is facing the world in the sense of

simply because celluloid has fallen out of fashion, and so wish to pause for a moment to evaluate the logic of this potentially devastating argument. Do Cavell’s claims, here and elsewhere, really hinge on what film theory has called the *photographic indexicality* of the moving image? Granted he could not have anticipated while writing *The World Viewed* that this so-called indexical bond was on the verge of being ruptured, nor that the rupturing would fail to result in such images being severed from their belonging to cinema and, in turn, cinema’s belonging to media in general. But is it not also the case that everything Cavell says about film and in the name of philosophy was said in the light of television? By the time of Cavell’s first writings on film the initial shock of television’s arrival had long since come and gone. Perhaps he even experienced some relief, in broaching this new and strange and burgeoning field of study, to not have to worry about anticipating what seems to me a significantly greater turning point in the ontology of the medium with the fragmented persistence of the world in the home and across homes. The gravity of the sort of tyrannical domestication applied to the world during the dissemination of television can be gauged in something as obvious and effortlessly observable as the majority of people with televisions staying home, staying in, to watch the world, as if the conditions of “outside” could be satisfied “inside” to such an extent that to turn to the world on the TV screen was (and still is) at the same time to turn away from it – from the one measly and continuous world just beyond one’s windows and doors. The desire, if you will, is to see what is *on* as opposed to what is *there*, what is on instead of behind the screen, and, moreover, *who* is behind what is on it, watching us watch it, and on the basis of all that adjusting the information on the set, or if one station seems as cryptic as another – inside and outside or private and public seeming hopelessly alien to one another – turning the entire set off or, more often than not, falling asleep to the hypnotic droning and clamor.

meeting it head-on or rising to its occasion; but I am nevertheless quite sympathetic to the experience of being forced to face that screen in a way that comes far less naturally, even dangerously, in the world itself, and which nature has repeatedly corrected for the sake of our persistence, that is, with *static fearlessness* in the face of constant movement and surprise and irreversibility.

The thesis is spread into three parts, each one its own whole, internally coherent and practically self-sufficient, despite this push for a philosophical narrative informing the gaps. As such, perhaps they are best described as episodes: what links them is less a linear course of inquiry than the running disquiet of a highly elusive idea (what I'm calling the idea behind the ideas), which triggers different rallying and trial-and-error-like strategies of intellectual homeostasis. Stronger, safer, cooler ways of relieving a deep-seeded itch were no doubt possible, but that was not for me to know when I was consumed by the problems and took to writing as a way through as opposed to around them.

It went, and now goes, like this. Beginning with the particularity of a film explicitly about painting and implicitly about filmmaking, fit the way through with images of and as making; moves to the particularity of film in general – moving images of or about the world – whose automatic indulgence in contingency a priori to the creative manipulation and “narrativization” of the medium is valuable as a demonstration of its necessity in the world; and ends with the conditions under which the self can become its own medium in a world replete with apparatuses of influence and undergo

transformation or a process of psychic adaptation through the act of interpreting works of art. In the first chapter, contingency is debated within the site of creativity where two distinct mediums of expression (painting and cinema) call for very different and sometimes contradictory strategies of appropriation (i.e. domination and acquiescence). In the second, the exemplary reification of contingency in the moving image into something of a model form (what I found myself wanting to call an anthropomorphism) offers the relatively passive viewer the chance to reconcile temptations to both dominate and defer through an act of acknowledgement. The presence/absence of the screened world (in which nothing and everything is lost) is conceptualized as a “reflective wall of glass” against which the finite extent of the will’s reach to alter the world in its own image, or as per its want, is potentially put back into proportion with the subject. In the third, the passionate and conscientious act of reading and writing old and new texts (interpreting texts) reveals that the more the self exposes itself to solidified or finished acts of creation, the more it will be able to create itself by giving itself *up* for interpretation – at first despite its contingent condition and then, perhaps, as a natural consequence of it: as the prize for the victory over nihilism with the help of a Nietzschean redemption of nihilism.

“Contingency,” again according to T.J. Clark, and again on the subject or theme of modernism, “was a fate to be suffered, and partly to be taken advantage of, but only in order to conjure back out of it – out of the false regularities and indiscriminate free flow – a new pictorial unity. Out of the flux of visual particles would come the body again (says Cezanne) – naked, in Nature, carrying the fixed weaponry of sex. Out of the shifts and transparencies of virtual space (says Picasso) would come the violin and the mandolin

player. Tokens of art and life.”⁸ Every art form will have its own specific relationship to contingency, its own means for practitioners to navigate and solve their own means of breaking down representation by, say, harnessing or using or ceding chance or, more unsuspectingly, by doubling-up conventional necessities through strategies of irony. Film, on the other hand, was without a choice in the matter, for the medium “embodied”⁹ contingency from the moment it first appeared, establishing it in the realm of representation in such a way as not to undermine or even destroy representation but rather to objectify and totalize it once and for all (or so it would appear). While all the other arts took contingency as permission and pressure to experiment with conventional methods of representation through a variety of attempts to transcend them by deconstructing them so as to found a new pictorial unity (perhaps this time with its structure visible and thus available right on the surface for future critique and appropriation), film seemed to begin

⁸ T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 11.

⁹ I wish to double stress the fact that film (the spatio-temporal projection of reality) did not literally embody contingency upon its first appearance at the turn of the century (for being colourless and soundless its representation stood quite far from how reality itself appeared), nor prior to the arrival of video and digital imaging in the early 1950’s (for significant improvements in lens technology and stock sensitivity and density, including further developments in colour and sound, could not render the entirety of the world equally filmable nor surpass what Mary Ann Doane has called “the brake of the film frame”), nor upon this current rapid and somewhat relief-filled institutionalization of digital production and post-production methods (for the freedom to record the world with unsurpassed efficacy and ease, even in extremely low-light or previously unreachable situations, and add or subtract virtually any amount of visual information through the use of highly sophisticated computer programming, for the most part has had the effect of turning filmmakers into painters confined to a fully-wrought perceptual picture of the world or, if starting from scratch in a purely virtual (canvas-like) landscape, turning painters into filmmakers who then proceed to confine themselves to a fully-wrought world-picture of cinema). So when I say that cinema marked the first representational embodiment of contingency I am referring to it in a manner derived from Andre Bazin’s notion that cinema is always the medium yet to be invented. See “The Myth of Total Cinema” in *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1967), p. 17-22.

paradoxically as though the medium itself were an experiment on representation the result of which was not Cezanne's color patches or Seurat's dots operating simultaneously with figurative elements but rather a machine's first glimpse in time and space. What it "saw" is everything there was to be revealed to *sight without sense*, and what that went on to reveal upon projection came in the form of a revelation that we ordained be carried out without us, upon our command and in our name, while we sit back and watch our wish for the world-as-such unfold. Cavell very appropriately categorizes this act, or moment of an act, as one of "letting our actions go out of our hands"¹⁰ and, as it were, *doing* nothing.

The second chapter on the value of cinematic contingency is anomalous, even within this context of a whole made up of autonomous parts, because it is composed of parts or fragments presented more or less as I found them and, on top of that, operates transitionally insofar as it phases out the subject of film during a gradual (non-argumentative) movement from an ontology of contingency to conditions for its appropriation and redemption. It seemed to me that film's revolutionary leap towards a mythic embodiment of contingency, so overwhelming upon its arrival at the end of the 19th century, was in turn overwhelmed not only by the responses of makers and viewers and critics to counteract, domesticate and in some significant sense *repress* the very miracle of representational totalization, but by an appeal amidst an early 20th century cohort of underground enthusiasts to sort themselves out into "makers" and "viewers" and "critics." The reasoning behind such a war waged against cinematic contingency is both historically and psychologically complex. Perhaps the sort of situation

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 159.

representation was getting itself into was not sufficiently or accurately anticipated.

Perhaps no one thought that the moving image on its own would turn out after all to be so disappointingly uneventful, that the possibility of a fresh encounter with the familiar or everyday world would be met before long with disinterest and hostility. Or perhaps the contingent event was simply regarded as being beyond description, beyond interpretation, bouncing back all conscious and unconscious acts of aesthetic anthropomorphisms like an immaculately polished mirror. Or perhaps audiences were simply reluctant to sit back and be still, especially with cinema arriving at a time when so much attractive stimuli competed for the shrinking attention of the average city person, where wherever one turned there lurked the potential for something new to see, a reason to stand up and shift positions and ultimately to turn away. If anyone managed to recognize nothing more or less than the full weight of what was shown on the screen at a given moment, what was there obviously wasn't enough, and was soon after subject to all sorts of methods – on top of the medium's own ontological restrictions upon contingency – for shaping and directing – structuring – what was there, as if the best of both worlds (the world-as-such and the world as we know it) had been seized simultaneously as one and the same. A sense of both greed and anxiety appear to be equally significant albeit separate motivations for cultivating cinema in the foreign lands of the preceding arts; and by indulging the former as a defense against the latter, “the human” is believed to be triumphantly reaffirmed by the successful attempts to claim the art of film from the medium's complete dependency on a technology that functions not only mechanically but automatically, that is, self-sufficiently – a characteristic that conspicuously encroaches upon criteria for agency many take to be sacredly specific to consciousness and the will.

It is more a phenomenological experiment to take the irreversibility and irrevocability of this “perfectly meaningless truth” of cinematic contingency to signal the limit of the human will, in the face of what exists, to alter what once existed. Film catches contingency in its nature as intractable plentitude and thereby sets up this very important moral: the will is the power to affect our lives, our relationship to life and the lives in it, and not life itself. In film, life itself, bare life, characterized by the presence of the world as such, is the barrier that the will, in directing its power, cannot cross without slipping into unconscious desire and/or a nihilism bent on destruction. As though from film’s promise of candor the stage is set for every swing of deceit, every variety of transgression, every trick or game or spectacle of illusion under the guise of representation that has had to remain in and between minds, projected out of frustration or disappointment or boredom with the deceptive simplicity (call it the overexposure) of unbridled faithfulness. (Actions are difficult if not impossible to let go of without being able to trust them in the hands of the other *at the precise moment* in which they can be entrusted to the other *as a receiver*. If one of the underlying ideals of film is to let our actions go out of our hands and know, as Cavell would say, by way of acknowledgment, then it is only natural for makers and viewers and critics of film to make for the ideal and, by doing so, reach a full knowledge *of* as opposed to *through* acknowledgment. This might seem like a terrible cop-out, compromise and failure of a contradiction to settle for *having* what must by nature be *undergone*, but is that for us to say who strive to know differently or to be otherwise in knowledge yet can go no further without experiencing the required loss of consciousness or lowering of the subject *as a loss, the loss?*)

Does cinema, for reasons outlined above, breed excessive or even aggressive methods of interpretation, whereby conceptual and semantic “reinforcements” across the many disciplines of the humanities (and occasionally beyond) are summoned indiscriminately and irrespectively of the limits of interpretation? Is it possible that the impulse to interpret a film in, let us say, a disproportionate manner, is the same as the impulse to use the medium for primarily or even purely narrative purposes by directly importing the more “proven” possibilities of painting, literature and theater? If so, if such a comparison is valid if not true, can we then describe this impulse as reactionary instead of responsive, or as responding to a threat within the very nature of the new medium? Contingency and cinema for me converge precisely within the tensions and tenseness and obsessiveness of our need to interpret works of art in the midst of life’s work, a need which seems to be easily provoked by the extreme disconnect between the form of art and the content of life that emerges as a result of the narrative rationalization of the irrationality of cinematic contingency. One way of reasoning the logic of this outcome (a historical approach I do not explicitly take up) is to say that the institutional and theoretical cultivation of cinema developed too fast, perhaps as fast as – or in response to the speed of – film absorbing photography by providing it all at once with the logistical solution to the stasis of its representation. I would not say, however, even if I could know all the reasons, that it developed in the wrong direction or that the development has not been most fruitful or even progressive, rather only that what was seen to be specific to the medium (the capture and projection of reality) must have been generally regarded as being grossly unspecific to serve as the fundament of an art unless the contingent appearance of reality could be made to *matter* to a gathered audience, that is, to people

who show up at the same time and the same place and for a price (one's time, one's space, one's dollars and cents). This desire to make the screening of reality matter in a manner uncharacteristic of reality itself – by anthropomorphizing reality through intense and invasive structures of dramatic emphasis, through all sorts of liberties taken with the “raw innocence” of the world-as-such – resulted, it seems to me, not only in the concealment or repression of cinematic contingency via narrative convention but, more importantly I think, in the consequent manifestation of the contingency of our spectatorial and interpretive procedures – that what viewers and critics think and say about what they see and hear onscreen is just as much on or about what is there as *against* it – extending the exile of contingency and with it its tremendous value for an ethics of criticism.

The primary objective of this thesis is to raise the stakes of contingency within modern aesthetics and demonstrate some ways in which the plight of contingency can become the purpose of subjectivity and hence the very medium of self-realization. By the end, or perhaps throughout the course of the final chapter, the self can be seen to emerge as the only contingency over which the will has any real determining power, but that power is not self-sufficient or internal to a process of self-determination. Rather it is contingent upon whether or not it has been empowered by a sense of profound powerlessness in the hold of certain artistic achievements (those experienced as exemplary realizations of will) that seem to provide just the right conditions – the key – for our own self-cultivation. It's not that an interpretation says more about an interpreter, or a thought in fact says more about who thought it (and why), or stories are *just* stories

because they are too contingent upon their committed tellers, but rather that these interpretations and thoughts and stories about things both outside and other than ourselves are, at the same time, and in fact, interpretations and thoughts and stories about *us*. They hold for a world which, not being ours, cannot do without our being, our being human in it, that is, so far as we are able to be concerned with it – gathering everything (all this) into the status of the world (this world). The picture of the world that emerges is therefore not one that is strictly inside or outside us as *in between* us and others and what we call “the world,” creating the possibility of the coming together and moving apart of inside and outside realities. But the world cannot do this, only language can, and what we do in language stays in language, affecting those who speak the same language and influencing what can be said – interpreted, thought, told – by way of language. Lastly, it is important to remember as language asserts its authority over our consciousness that what we do in language is not merely the sum of what we say, for during those experiences where words seem most pressing and superfluous, real and illusory, necessary and contingent, the only form of truth and lie there is to be had, we are either silent or wish we could stay so.

One last set of preliminaries regarding this final connection between interpretation and self-creation. Artists and critics have been traditionally viewed as inhabiting opposite sides of the work of art, standing on each other’s receiving end. It is thought, still, that the artist is the one responsible for creating the work while the role of the critic is to interpret its meaning (to find out what and why it means and what its creator could not have dared to guess). Criticism, in this old picture, is second in line to artistic creation, the dusk to the artwork’s dawn, as it were. But just how stable and successive and near causal is this

trajectory and dynamic? To what extent can we say upon scrupulous reflection of texts we call “art” and those we call “criticism” – texts equally burdened with the power and responsibility to entertain and enlighten and sometimes compel our most uncharacteristic reactions – that the work of a “creator” is inherently *interpretive* and the work of an “interpreter” inherently *creative*? What is the substance of the difference, indeed what remains of the difference, if it is no longer based on the absurd idea that to create is to create from nothing and to interpret is to create nothing at all? It is a running theme of this thesis to experiment with such a reversal so as to test the hypothesis that what truly separates artists and critics (perhaps in our own minds as readers) has less to do with the differences between works of art and criticism (as significant as those differences are) than the audiences they each have in mind (creeping in from below or supervising from above), even in the absence of conscious efforts to make contact with the “outside world” from which artists and critics and spectators alike must periodically withdraw as the path to membership. And if, generally speaking, artists appeal to readers (in the broad sense) and critics to writers (in the strict sense), then perhaps a reason why creation is ascribed solely to the artist and interpretation solely to the critic (and nowhere near vice versa) is because there is no one but the critic, no work but criticism, to write out the interpretation (call it the underlying bond) governing any given act of creation.¹¹

¹¹ If I were to experiment with this distinction using the criterion of creation, I would limit it to opposing views towards the possibility and value of the “new”: Artists believe, rightly and wrongly, that the only thing new under the sun is their own self-consciousness, one that they will not be able to get past no matter how far the creative process ventures to take them beyond the scope of their being, for self-consciousness is one if not the most essential priming forces of artistic creation. Critics believe, rightly and wrongly, that there is *nothing* new under the sun, that the new is as worthless as it is impossible, because they see that the only thing that can truly bring them to self-consciousness (and create the conditions for creation) is consciousness of other selves

What if we were to reposition ourselves within this picture by looking at it from the perspective of the work of art and ask: What's the difference, or the meaning of the difference, between an art for artists and an art for spectators? Nietzsche's idea of an "art for artists"¹² contains a clue for the joining of artist and spectator on the common ground of the will to power. Both artist and spectator are in the position (opposite but mutual positions) to attend to the claim of the work of art: the artist undergoes a process of creation (riddled with repetition) while the spectator undergoes a process of passage (troubled by identification). A painter or writer or filmmaker, I assume we can agree, is not an artist by virtue of creation alone, in the same way that a spectator of a painting or novel or film is not an artist by virtue of subjecting himself to, and putting himself wholly in the service of, the fiction out in front. The title of "artist" seems to me applicable only to those who seek their virtue in the act (art) of transformation. Transformation refers to something greater, more significant, perhaps significantly strategic, than merely changing. Change, after all, is constant, whether we go along with it or not, and is marked by a retrospective awareness of a change having occurred, at which point all one can do is accept or reject the lot that has been dealt as a permanent consequence. To transform, on the other hand, means quite literally to change forms, to become someone else – the next self – in the continuum of one's life, and entering the next self is the equivalent to beginning the next and newest phase of that life. Only a concept such as *adaptation* – fuel for new chapters in the odyssey of life on earth – is fit to account for the kind of change on which both survival and perfection are at stake (and at odds). In terms of the evolution

(other creations) to such a point where consciousness must be lost or temporarily suspended or thrust off its tracks in order to interpret anew its own latest reflection.

¹² See *The Gay Science*, p. 37.

of the human, where criteria for survival and perfection are no longer writ large nor clearly differentiated in nature, transformations that occur in total seclusion so that only the transformer can take stock of the difference are not legitimate adaptations. If no one else can perceive and thus confirm that one has indeed taken place it is because its design is incomprehensible, confirming the fact that what is unreadable for all is precisely what stays written for one. An art for artists is in danger of being solipsistic or “monological” (Nietzsche’s word) unless the artist can afford to oppose the tyranny of art by resisting substituting his or her most cherished work with the dialogical foundation of his or her essential character. So it is that an art of life becomes an art *for* life, otherwise it is just art; and works of art, be it paintings or persons, are totally inadequate substitutes for what are truly the most important works – *examples*. Interpretation as a medium of self-realization is meant as a step in this direction.

I’m quite sure that what I’ve been referring to as the idea behind the idea belongs to the following line of resolute question and tentative answer: Why is contingency – an apparently neutral concept – perceived as a threat? Why does it *come* as a threat? What does it threaten? Why does the word conjure something absent in the world and as a consequence of our *being present* in the world? What do we actually mean by it or want to mean by it? I think one of two things: either history, “the heart of history,” has stopped beating a tune we can recognize and resume, or the beating of that heart is finally being heard more clearly than ever as that of our own. If the two are seen as opposite sides of the same coin, or perhaps close enough to being one and the same, then perhaps the goal underlying our notion of contingency is to perceive its threat as a symptom of the infancy of our metaphysical freedom and therefore as a sign that a spirit so freed (to the bone, as

it were) is officially mortal: sentenced not to death but to the flesh that dies. Despite the sacrifice, despite the death of a certain God in Man, there is nothing more that the spirit could want – its dream – than to one day possess its form so as to begin its actual life, our life of the body, *biologically*.

While moves from film to philosophy and back seem to me natural enough and more or less justifiable, my coming to philosophy from film (incidentally the opposite direction taken by Cavell) also has something of a story behind it, one whose brief telling might shed some light on my decision to look outside a discipline as a means of reaching the dark and inner depths of questions held in common. It seems clear enough today that any irreconcilable difference between one discipline and another, and between various modes of thought and their disciplining, is due less to the ways they pursue answers to the same questions than the discourses used by “proponents” to possess as intellectual property one answer over another, whereby the sealing off of intellectual contributions from neighboring disciplines, not to mention the culture as a whole, has become one of the most accepted measures of contribution itself.

The truth of the matter is that philosophy has always been the mode through which I’ve studied the medium and art of film and come to know it best. I could also say, or confess, in trying to trace the root of my interest in philosophy, that film, at least until very recently, has actually stood in the way of my investigations into the very thing that excited me most about it: experience and the everyday. As a young adolescent student overwhelmed by philosophers with complex and ambivalent relationships to everyday

experience (i.e. Heidegger and Nietzsche), I persisted to try to reconcile what I took to be the most profound ideas with what repeatedly struck me as their most vital enactments in film. In more attempts than I care to recall, the intimacy and sometimes even the dependency I perceived between film and philosophy would result in essays that for the most part failed to put to use the tools that each seemed to provide as a means for both understanding and being understood by its other. Perhaps by misinterpreting philosophy as the art of thought as opposed to something more on the lines of the practice of insight, I would often begin my work back then with philosophy cast as a way into the concreteness of film, say as the framing of the film(s) to be thought about, only to discover soon after a sense of helplessness to escape from its perch, a feeling I now understand as simply not having known how to use it. Trapped in thought, thought became its own language, and as such it propagated itself faster than I knew how to think, which is to say it moved in circles (around me); and when the time came to own up to my best intentions and bring it all back to film, I was reluctant, because I became fearful, shocked to discover that what had seemed so pregnant with meaning during those late night screenings had become during those late night writings all but foreign.

With a passion for philosophy as unwavering as ever, things started to change in terms of my intellectual relationship with film when I came upon the work of Cavell. I needed a philosopher above all to show me a fruitful way from philosophy to film, which actually turned out to be a means of moving from words to images. *The World Viewed*, to take nothing away from its extraordinary treasury of ideas, inspired more than instructed me to build up a confidence to see (rather than merely think) that the kinds of philosophical problems that actually pose problems or result in problems for our human

existence can have a kind of quotidian correlate in both the conditions and possibilities of the medium of film. Philosophy, when refracted through the prism of film, could transcend the walls of its disciplinary containment by returning to its source in our everyday experience. Cavell's work is still instrumental, still useful, in my ability to believe in the potential of the cinema to make legible both the dramatic and casual undergoing – would he ever want to call it the *immanence*? – of what is called “philosophy.” His deep commitment to finding the epiphanic banalities of onscreen occurrences has led me to reinterpret a claim he made at the beginning of his grand philosophical work *The Claim of Reason* regarding his choice to understand philosophy “not as a set of problems but as a set of texts.”¹³ Those texts, it seems to me Cavell has shown, can no longer be confined merely to those of philosophy if philosophy is to avoid being confined merely to the possession of its own texts. And film has already shown philosophy to have avoided this with certain films functioning as texts in their own right, where philosophical problems can be apprehended as opposed to comprehended and made sensible only insofar as they appear recognizable. The experience of recognizing in a film an aspect of or a contradiction within the human condition is, first and foremost, a response to finitude, hence an act of solidarity before an attempt at a solution, and solidarity emerges as a means of solving the philosophical predicaments of isolation or solipsism or skepticism.

Much of what follows proceeds by way of the field of aesthetics, turning around this most crucial point of intersection between film and philosophy. It is within aesthetics, I believe, that philosophy can illuminate the logic of a film's means of

¹³ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1979), p. 3.

knowing the world, thus perhaps learning to teach the film its own language and meaning; while film, on the other hand, and as a sort of constructive counterpoint to the arrogation of philosophy, marks the precise moment where the word loses out to the image and the will to know confronts the unknowable. I am especially interested in how philosophy can help film show that part of what it means to know the world is to know the meaning of being disappointed with mere knowledge of it. While the limits of knowledge in philosophy will continue to manifest as the errors of contradiction or the follies of paradox or the graceful avoidances of silence or, most commonly, through intense performances of rhetorical certitude, the same limits in film inspire points of departure into various forms of experiential knowing and the chance to demonstrate the rehabilitation of experience *as* knowledge. My interest, ultimately, in this kind of knowing is that its criteria do not hinge on certainty whatsoever, but rather upon the capacity to cope with the inevitability of uncertainty. Such knowledge amounts to something significantly greater than the power to devise systems of thought: the power not only to survive but also *subsist* upon their reconfiguration and collapse.

Chapter 1

At the Drawing Board of the World: Reading the Filmmaking of Victor Erice's Dream of Light

“Cinema might be young, but it was born when
humanity was very old.” Antonio Lopez Garcia

At the end of the film *Dream of Light* (Spain, 1992, also known as *The Quince Tree Sun*), a movie camera, the one that's been filming the entire time on top of a tripod, the one filming right now as we view its surrogate onscreen, is shown in place of a canvas and easel at the precise spot that the Spanish painter Antonio Lopez stood, day after day, month after month, painting a little quince tree growing in his studio backyard in Madrid. This camera onscreen, this camera actor or impersonator, in a gesture that hearkens all the way back to the kino-eye aesthetics of Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929), turns on by itself to film some fallen quinces beneath a tungsten light that is under the same spell as the camera, fading in and out without any human intervention. From this privileged perspective of film artifice at work, what the camera films and the light lights turns out to be a staging of the painter's dream-memory of rotting quinces illuminated by the rays of a setting sun that he witnessed as a child. Though delayed until the conclusion, the scene constitutes the introspective climax of the patiently observed film; and as strange as it is for a film persistent in its blatant disregard for conventional hierarchies of emphasis to climax at all, stranger still is one that strikes from “outside” or “underneath” the diegesis into the very heart or root of it like a bolt of lightning. Reflecting on its origins instead of referring back to its beginnings, the scene belongs to the smallest group of reflexive enactments that contribute to the myth of the

medium's peculiarly animate nature with respect to the mechanical automatism of the camera. As such, it can't help arouse wonder over how the events of this particular film came to reach the point, the limit, where a forceful folding-back occurs as if it were the most natural thing, the most naturally inevitable way for a documentary that so quietly and implicitly unfolds as the documentation of its own making to "end."

I am envisioning that this chapter will amount to the sort of reading I wish for it if pursued more as an attempt to answer for this last set of quotation marks surrounding – cross-examining – the idea of completion than through approaches typically taken towards what we take completed works of art to be. The most obvious explanation for the neglect of this kind of approach to film (and perhaps also to texts in general) is that the great majority of films, in common with most works of art, are made to assume a more or less conventional state of resolute completion for audiences who have come to instinctively expect a sense of completeness or coherency or professionalism while intuitively wishing for some form of perfection. For those who choose to think and write about the films they see, the instinct is just as strong to conceptualize a given film as unambiguously finished and, if deemed masterful, as constituting an enhanced crystallization or transcendence of its process of construction. It is possible, although far from profitable, to approach a film purely as a palimpsest of the forces that produced it, but any attempt to betray an end for a beginning – text for its own inherent context – would have to come at the expense of the film's identity by working against the grain of its contribution. There do exist films (few and far between) that find ways of incorporating the process of their own making without explicitly making it their subject, making it their mission to document that very process into diary-like narratives.

Dream of Light by Victor Erice is the only film I know whose practice of looking at the artistic process of a realist painter opens the way for a *dialogue* between similar sets of aesthetic values filtered through, and hence conditioned by, different mediums. By dialogue I refer to a process of exchange between painting and filming, between one form of representing the world and another distinct but compatible form, which takes place at the level of the film itself and works through irreconcilable disagreement and kindred like-mindedness simultaneously. The difficulty in reading a film that has managed to both document and demonstrate the creative process is that its discourse, lucid as it is, ends up being less an overt realization of intentions than a covert accumulation of continuous and parallel intentionality. In other words, Erice and Lopez, filmmaker and painter, are not strictly identifiable with the individual creative agencies of “painter” and “filmmaker” in the film, for as representations of themselves onscreen (or off screen in Erice’s case) their actual “intending” existence is not only mediated but quite constituted by their roles as the main protagonists in a film that to a large extent undergoes and contains – and is never properly about – its own making. (If the logic of the documentary requires sorting out over and above the questions raised by its events, then it is only because its logic is such that it comes up against and thereby discovers – can ask without putting – those very questions.) The traces of creation leading up to the sudden disclosure of the camera itself are thus not limited to the incidental, accidental or even the arbitrary, but can be seen to function when they do as decisive and significant instances of an *autonomous aesthetic process* whose reflexive dimension gradually builds to a kind of first-person characterization of conventional third-person narrativity. *Dream of Light*, in

this way, survives without having to surrender the “death mask” that Walter Benjamin described as concealing and preserving the original conception of the work of art.¹

Before becoming too steeped in how a finished film can be so intimately tied to its own making (to the extent that the making crosses the line of the made), it might be helpful for the reader to know where this type of documentary receives its impetus or calling.² One day, some time during the transition from summer to fall, Erice gets word

¹ Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 459. The kinds of aesthetic instances I wish to treat in good conscience as traces (cracks in the death mask) are tied both to the medium of film and an approach to filmmaking premised on the potential for discovery opened by the filming process itself. They are discoverable as textual through a sensitivity to contradiction, transformation, ambiguity, digression, and even destruction, as aspects of an aesthetic that function to open and expand and multiply rather than wholly determine or see-through the meanings of the film. There nevertheless remain many films (perhaps the majority, perhaps even the strongest) that aspire to entomb ideas into forms, perspectives into realities, more or less deterministically. The films of Sergei Eisenstein and Alfred Hitchcock come immediately to mind. I do not have very high hopes for these to yield the sort of structural openings and gaping contingencies necessary in enabling the strict causality of a narrative to loosen and become more exploratory. Instead I look to those which circumvent their own power to hold reality in check while still holding to reality; films whose faith in the closure of representation and in seamless causal continuities of representations has been shattered by the 20th century’s profusion of epistemological paradigms, by a modern (postmodern?) milieu that copes in both collaborative and reactionary ways with a prevailing absolutism of uncertainty due in large measure to an obstinately groundless and resigned relativity.

² It might also be helpful to remember, first, that documentaries, at least insofar as the filming aspect is concerned, require, very often, and as a bare minimum, a justification of intent and not an entire enterprise or artifice of intentions to begin a process of discriminate collecting. Another way of putting the blurry distinction between documentary and fiction, or using the distinction despite its gross limitations, is to say that documentary filmmakers can find or even put themselves in the position to film material and not scenes, or if the scene is an invention to film it *as* material, that is, as *raw* – in the flesh of the real. The documentary cinematographer’s principle to keep open at all times the spare eye that is free of the circumscription of the camera’s viewfinder is based on the conviction – although the proponents of a more *cinéma vérité* approach might want to call it the belief – that reality can’t be processed technologically, appropriated phenomenologically, and examined intellectually and affectively, until it is captured the way it unfolded.

of Lopez's intention to begin a painting of a quince tree with sun. (The two, it is worth mentioning, had no prior contact except through an appreciation of each other's work and some visual sketches shot by Erice of Lopez painting in different locations throughout Madrid.) The effect of natural light upon the ripening quinces at this special time of year³ is regarded by Lopez as singular and ineffable, one that proceeds to destroy the quinces nourished during the spring by continuing to grow life beyond the form epitomizing it – a deeply inciting representational paradox for a realist painter. But time is scarce for Lopez to render the spirit of this most ephemeral light and likewise for Erice to document the spirit of that effort. So Erice, upon hearing of Lopez's intention (fatal ambition) to paint the tree, has little time to locate a camera and gather up some crew to begin a film without a script, few preconceptions, not having undergone the sort of depth of preparation that a filmmaker who leaves ten year gaps between features – having completed (“completed”⁴) only three to date – is perhaps accustomed to descending. And here he is outside the painter's studio on September 29th, 1990, just as Lopez is arriving

³ Vernillo del Membrillo as it is called in Spain, meaning “little summer of the quince,” for which the North American equivalent would be Indian Summer.

⁴ The word is encased in quotations because Erice's second feature *El Sur* (1983) is lacking his intended conclusion. The protagonist Estrella, an adolescent girl, was supposed to have traveled to the south at the end to fulfill the unrealized destiny of her father. Due to financial difficulties, the sort which tend to bog down and compromise even the most secure productions, Erice was not able to film the necessary scenes. Notwithstanding the generous sense-making aspirations of critics who read the exclusion of the south of the film's title as a comment on the fundamental unattainability of a future free of the disappointments of the past, Erice himself has stated that the film is (and not just for him) fundamentally incomplete without an end that marks a new beginning for Estrella in the form of a new experience of time as a mature adult. A shift in time, in the way time moves and feels as it passes just the same, is the director's signature criterion for the articulation of real, permanent, or traumatic changes in consciousness. The device is also aesthetically logical as opposed to excessive because the properties of time and space are vital in picturing changes in consciousness when the stuff in “the room” of consciousness happens to remain, as is so often the case, unchanged, or just as one left it.

bearing materials for the construction of his latest canvas. The beginning of the film, focused as it is on the beginning of a painting, also marks the beginning of the filmmaking.⁵

I am leaning towards reading the film chronologically for no other reason than that the circumstances of its making were the primary principle for the organization and structure of its finished circumstances. This is evidenced not in the history of the film's making but for us to see in the film itself. Marked throughout with precise calendar dates (day, date and month) that appear as captions onscreen, charting the fictional passage of real time, the events of the film can thus be said to unfold in sequence (a fact which does not depend on whether or not the content of a specific scene or shot occurred when it occurs in the film or was intended during filming to occur *that way*.) Erice's distribution of dates over the course of the entire film – keeping track of the passing of time while deciding when to acknowledge that enough of it has passed to warrant breaking it – gives it the gentle rhythm, rigor and density of a diary. It is, perhaps, a diary film, which of course does not necessarily make it a film diary, for that would reduce it to a complex albeit random stream of thoughts (or observations) riding, securing and resisting, simultaneously, the inexorable current of the everyday. Lopez the painter, whose subject this time around is the quince tree, is the unquestioned subject of the film; his presence in

⁵ And yet there could be nothing within the beginning of this film, or any text for that matter, that could testify to the encounter with the beginning itself, with the way it was reached and announced and successfully or unsuccessfully surpassed. What I have just put forth is merely a hypothesis that can mean nothing outside of our own participation with a certain measure of paradox and which I must dispense with, or work towards dispensing, for the sake of participating with the *full* amount of the film, the film as indeed *finished*, in order for it to constitute (if it does) but a fragment or acknowledge itself to be without end as a result of not having “properly” begun – having extended the beginning into the process of its *execution* in both senses of the word and hence in a contradictory sense.

front of the tree, his everyday surroundings, along with the inevitable encroachment of those surroundings upon his most insular privacy, constitute the spine of its continuity from start to finish; and Erice appears to keep a purely “cinematic diary” of it all, keeping a promise to himself to film each and every day regardless of how disappointingly uneventful and stranded and insular a single given day might be, without rhyme or reason, both for an insider like Lopez and the people around him as much as for an outsider like Erice and his crew.

This picture of a cinematic diary is still too convenient to go uncriticized: *two* pictures, in fact, have been rather obviously, perhaps seductively superimposed one on top of the other, and I think I ought to straighten it, to understand so as to correct the intuition behind it, before proceeding to read this particular film with the help of it. For starters, the writing of a diary entry is the kind of work typically scheduled for the night, after the fact of the day, in the wake of the affairs of the world or whenever one feels free from one’s own affairs. What gets written, theoretically, – for I do not pretend to know all the forms this writing could take – gets written in recollective and resonant response *to* something (event, observation, encounter, feeling, thought, face) which will necessarily exclude the activity of writing from the intimate duration of a particular experience. Even if the tools of writing are on hand and reached for, the act of writing begins always as an afterward – in response *to*, in reflection *of*, in compensation *for*, over and above “the thing.” That thing, however, is precisely what the tool of the camera registers unconditionally, over and above the response. Of all the characteristics that distinguish these two mediums of picturing, the most decisive for clarifying the diaristic conditions of filming is the prior presence of the world instead of the blank page (or the

presence of a prior absence). Erice, as long as he films what he has framed to see, cannot therefore materialize within the material duration of the shot his passing thoughts about it, for he is not in the position to withdraw from the object's "time of day" that the camera commits him to record (and defer response). "[W]hen working properly," writes Malcolm Turvey, "a camera records, in the form of a photograph, what is in front of it, regardless of what the camera operator thinks or believes is in front of it."⁶ Hence the part of the world that Erice observes from behind the camera can be said to exactly coincide with the mechanical transcription of the observation. The filming creates or, let us say, factualizes it, after which a response in the form of a form of writing is possible and, with respect to the art of film, necessary. Editing here enters the picture, after the fact of the recorded pictures, as film's specific form of writing (an idea I hope to enlarge once we're well immersed and involved in the film's "thought").⁷ Even though I have reached the conclusion that the entries in Erice's cinematic diary of Lopez's process of painting and living and those of everyday life are fundamentally inseparable from the events that they document (because they are comprised of those very events), I do not doubt for a moment that Erice did not think and come to partially understand the meaning of what he was documenting *in terms* of its potential relations to other documents: thoughts to be

⁶ Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 5.

⁷ Few films, I should mention, are credited for being as thoughtful – full of thinking and space for thinking – as *Dream of Light*, and even fewer enjoy critics who believe that its "thoughts" are there for the taking (as they were for the having) as long as the viewer is willing to slow the train of his or her own thought to the pace of patience exemplified by the film. See, in particular, Jonathan Romney, "The Quince Tree Sun (El Sol de Membrillo)," in *Short Orders: Film Writing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), p. 41-45; Linda C. Ehrlich, "Interior Gardens: *Dream of Light* and the Bodegon Tradition," in *The Cinema of Victor Erice: An Open Window*, ed. Linda C. Ehrlich (Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), p. 192-205; and Laurence Giavarini, "Projected Shadow," in *The Cinema of Victor Erice: An Open Window*, p. 188-191.

redeemed once in the (post)position – scanning through the hours of footage like pages – to finally *write* the text of the film.⁸

The film begins, as I already mentioned, with Lopez walking towards the camera down a residential street in Madrid, carrying under his arm some thin planks of wood and a rolled up sheet of plastic (probably a tarp to protect the canvas paper) that he takes through a gate and into a yard where a friendly Husky springs up to greet him. His walk down the street is steady and purposive, betraying that unmistakable aura of allegiance to some awaiting and familiar chore. His intention at this point to paint, beginning with the construction of a canvas on which to do so, is clear to the extent that it is freely unspoken, legible in what I wish to call the focus or urgency of his bearing. These gestures of immanent praxis, banal as they are, call to mind the image of a small, somewhat complacent fire surrounded by cement, in this case a street with two rows of parked cars flanking both sides of the approaching figure. Despite the fact that Lopez is an actual

⁸ The rhythm, organization and balanced distribution of images in *Dream of Light* is about as scrupulously (economically) precise as it gets in the history of film. And yet the precision of that writing with images, as though the relative positions between one image and the next were as determinable and therefore irrevocable as words, still (although far from regrettably) does nothing to alter the imprecise, ungovernable “mongrel” condition of film, which viewers and critics alike are able to defend and value without hesitation as the power (or magic) of film. The vocabulary, semantics and syntax of the “language” onscreen compels like a language through a gestalt effect of all the stages and mediums and modes of expression starting from as early as the script (particularly if the writer is not also the director), but it is ultimately imprecise according to the criteria of language as such because, for one thing, the absorptive power of moving images and sounds is so often used to construct (conjure) a reality that looks to be already as meaningful, though nowhere near as readily understandable, as any language brought to describe or relate or understand it. All this to say that it will not do to speak of the “linguistic” content of a given shot or juxtaposition or sequence in a film independently of or prior to the radical sense of pure “givenness” to which shots, juxtapositions and sequences, especially of the world, owe their near automatic affinity with one another. From an infinity of givens, as it were, a film relates the world, from within the world, before we have the chance to bring our language to bear and refer to its world as “one.”

painter in real life (and the film confirms this during the opening shot by acknowledging that it has been inspired by one of his paintings), what makes the film more documentary than fiction has to do with the more fictional fact that his air of intentionality or “genius” is not dramatized through any expressionistic appropriation of time and space in the aesthetic. (The aesthetic, as we shall see, has spatio-temporal designs of its own that are specifically cinematic and, as it turns out, peculiarly self-referential.) In his day to day life, revealed one shot at a time by Erice, and beginning most emphatically with the film’s first, Lopez is often not a painter at all; and the notion that he might not even *be* a painter in the sense of not being solely or even primarily identifiable with his work, and have no interest or conception or purpose as a painter, say, at this particular moment of routine transition, are hypotheses – human contingencies – that can well up from the sense (as aloof as a smell) of a whirling cacophony of surrounding activities – active existences – that fill the soundtrack and possess the image from the outside in. Fact for fact sake, I suppose, is the spirit of this sense of immanent surround, which can seem to lead the filmed reality beyond the location Lopez inhabits towards what I can only describe as a condition of habitation bounding all beings between beings, and with it all the forms or faces maintained in any “single” being. Lopez is such a being whose approach towards the brink of a new beginning in the start of another painting *establishes* him, rooting him all the more deeply within the ambient resonance of the already-begun – the present state of history – or at least what’s left of history before entering and becoming the property of the past. The documentary image, the image as document, never complete of course without a corresponding soundtrack, accepts an unbridled measure of contingency unto the limit of interference, bearing the receding accumulation

of peripheral events occurring at *this* particular time and place, which regardless of their exact positions – beginning or ending, trailing off or calling out, next door or in the distance, withdrawing or thinning or punctuating – are synchronized in the continuity of the virtual and stripped of their coordinates as particulars. As a result, I would like to suggest that Erice opens the film *twice*: Once with Lopez walking down a street, presumably from his home or a supplies store and on route to his studio, and again by establishing the “virtual” context of an extended continuum⁹ of hypothetical off-screen space, similar in scope to the proposition with which Wittgenstein begins *The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “The world is all that is the case,”¹⁰ except for Erice (or for film) the sum of all cases gather piece by piece, particular by particular, within the duration of perception as opposed to the grammatical jurisdiction of language.

After carefully constructing a canvas from scratch, after creating – starting and finishing – a formal place to begin painting, Lopez is shown opening a tall set of blue doors connecting the studio to the courtyard. The courtyard is a rather narrow rectangle of space running alongside the small building. Trees healthy in appearance are lined up, in blocks of green, around the fence, while a short quince tree surrounded by seemingly infertile ground stands by itself near the center, its heavy and plentiful yellow fruits taxing a trunk that looks too thin for the task. (We find out later on that Lopez himself had planted the tree some years ago out of a special fondness for its fruit – the dingy, sapped, sand-like earth could never have yielded such concentrated plenitude.) Normally,

⁹ See the section entitled “The Extensive Continuum” in Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York and Cambridge, UK: The Macmillan Company, 1929), p. 95-126.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 5.

the tree grows and dies “in peace,” but today, after spending the previous day building the canvas, Lopez approaches the courtyard where the tree stands not as the person who once planted it but as a person who will try to make a painting of it, choosing the quince tree with autumn sun as an aspect or “idea” of the world to wonder about, over, and with, that is, the tree as a self-sufficient subject for consideration, as a whole whose participation in a whole ever larger called “the world” is temporarily suspended.

On the threshold, Lopez waits – seeming to stall – before deciding where to position his body and the canvas in relation to the quince tree. There is something awkwardly full – brimming and overbearing – about his pausing at the very edge of this decision, which feels like an open question embodied on behalf and because of the structured openness of the blank canvas.¹¹ It is significant, I think, that Lopez’s smallness as a person is apparent to us prior to the expanding concentration of his consciousness as a painter, for it is a sign (the quietest testament) of the extreme, almost voluptuous

¹¹ The openness of the canvas is described as “structured” because its blankness is merely something apparent, deceptive upon closer inspection of its spectacle of possibility, and ensnaring for seeming so perfectly untouched – for luring the painter to begin by a reckless heedlessness that can easily be mistaken for the path to freedom (paved by the deadly song of the deadliest muse – the Sirens). The criticism is indebted to Gilles Deleuze’s examination of the cliché in his book on the art of Francis Bacon, particularly when he writes that “It is a mistake to think that the painter works on a white surface. . . . The painter has many things in his head, or around him, or in his studio. Now everything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work. They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it.” *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 86. It will pay to keep these thoughts in mind as we move to a discussion of Lopez’s methods of preparation and structuring, whether they constitute a set of *precautions* against cliché infection by functioning as a trap set by the painter for the capturing of the model, which cannot be captured on canvas, according to Deleuze, unless the canvas functions in the end to successfully and permanently “reverse the relations between model and copy.”(Ibid.)

finitude of a human being alert at the edge of a desire not to be confined to his being, that is, a desire not to be as he has been before or as he is alone by himself. But what does one do while motionless on the threshold, fixed on the verge, inside the way from house to yard and back again?¹² Lopez lingers in indecision or hesitation or anticipation because those heavenly blue doors don't actually lead (for him) to the courtyard but rather (as painter) to the quince tree, which seems to cast into shadow by throwing into the distance the entire space surrounding the emanation of its perfectly centered and hence somewhat stage-like placement, one that is further picked out by the power of the canvas to reflect this living object in the sensibility of a painter who will perceive not just beauty and significance but also – although I am merely speculating – a sense of potential utility in the persistence of the mundane.

No object that we *choose* to remain with, after whatever function has been extracted and exhausted, can any longer just *be* what it is, even if nothing more than that

¹² In his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1975), it is Edward Said's preference (not hypothesis) to situate even the beginner's experience of silence-at-the-threshold somewhat paradoxically at the threshold of language where beginning intentions, however unformulated or half-formed or outright inscrutable, are always already in some form of dialogue with potential means of expression. "Beginning is doing – intending – a whole set of particular things primarily *in writing* or *because of writing*." (Said's emphases, 19) While language is certainly not the be-all-end-all of beginnings, the approach is not necessarily a problematic one (despite the critic's labors to point some of them out), but what it omits from the beginning-intention, it seems to me, is precisely the source of a fallacy endemic to the "doing" of a beginning, namely, that the part of us that is reluctant to begin is not also the same part that balks to resume, feeling as far away from where we *left off* as from the possibility of actually *starting off*. Clearing one's desk, centering the page, selecting a pen or wetting a quill or dusting off a keyboard, opening and closing certain books, cueing certain films, tailoring the light or changing locations . . . all these are tasks performed in silence before the thinking, finding and laying down of words seems possible and in certain privileged cases, perhaps, comes naturally. There is no standard way, and hence no guarantee, for a writer (or any maker) to secure a territory of forms prior to the occupation of territories of expression. Each and every beginning must build from scratch (and yet again) its own geography of admittance.

is all that's expected and asked of it. For when it becomes clear to ourselves that we've been overlooking something, particularly within the most immediate and familiar of surroundings, a natural impulse might be to *overlook*, to make up for lost time by starting over with the object from the root of its existence and at the center of our own, afresh, as though we were laying our eyes for the first time upon it, not to remove them until this time is also fit to stand for the last – when it is believed possible, finally, to relinquish in peace for knowing to have attributed more weight to the object than the being of it could hope to bear, or weigh, as if that object had its only set of roots in the realm of appreciation.

In admiring the quince tree, in being ravished by the force of its presence, in searching for a way to return, reply, show courtesy, and meet it where it is, is to invariably intrude on the terrain of its fundamental *otherness*, its distance and difference as a form of life which does not return, reply, curtsy, meet halfway. When approached in a spirit of servitude, a tree, being what it is, is still no less in service to itself. It is the approach, then, that is costly, for it holds the object to an otherness it cannot by nature declare, declaring “otherness” as evidence that there is always more of it, more fullness at stake within the depths of its essence to manifest, going deeper than the constant yielding of its darkest and most inscrutable depth. Lopez's approach honors the tree *for* what it is, proceeds for and because of the tree. He wants to see it, see all he can see, and moves accordingly. But the whole process will turn out a painting of and about something *more*, something extraneous to existence as laid out before us, to the tree's existence in space time and even the painter's passage through a separate human consciousness of time – more than is perceptible and presentable. Whatever presence awakens in an observer the

desire to represent it must in some sense appear awake to that person, an appearance which requires, in some sense, an awakening, or, in a deeper sense, an anthropomorphizing.

The poignancy of the artistic approach stems from its sense that something indeterminable is to be lost in the gain of the birth of the work of art. The gain, no doubt, is obviously additive. The sense, also, is precisely a product of this gain; the object of interest and desire appears, but so does the desire and the interest within the object – object and desire blur indistinguishably. Lopez, then, will lose the tree, or many of its most constitutive aspects despite his proximity – much of what it is that he is not and which he cannot hope to accurately translate. When does he lose it though? When he begins on it, turns on it for a beginning. How is the loss of the gain registered as poignancy? By knowing of no other way, other than by ways of knowing, to know. It is significant then that Lopez, in first approaching the tree from his standstill behind the blue doors, hides his hands, tucking one behind his back underneath his belt while holding a glass with the other. From this point on – point of no return – the tree will be developed into an entity, released into the apex of its singularity, through a golden rule of Lopez's method that he will not touch it, affect it, nor permit anyone else to touch or affect it, unless it is relevant to his method of representing it. In this way the tree is taken out of its element, laid down and reposed and appropriated within the ideal vantage of a new purpose. Now that he will not touch it the way he once planted it, now that he means to paint it by standing directly beside it, the tree is brought to bear that original species of man-made fruit: *mimesis*.

Let's now see how the business of creating from reality, or rather in direct adherence to what one perceives as reality, is worked out through the logistics of painting and from the perspective of cinema. I don't think viewers of film have ever been on the receiving end of such a generous step-by-step scrutiny of, and participation with, the rigorous preparation of a painter before painting and, no less, a filmmaker in the act of filming a painter to whom he is indebted and the art form his art has no less inherited.

Lopez's approach to painting is based on the somewhat antiquated (hence somewhat unfashionable) realist principle of representing the world as perceived with absolute faithfulness through mimesis. The principle of realism in the case of Lopez and the tree is met through a subjective following of the lead, a listening to, and in the end a value-based approximating of the already created and continually recreating quince tree. His first step is to frame the tree in a manner paralleling the dimensions of the canvas. He achieves this by plotting in the ground two long poles on either side of the tree. A length of string is then tied between them to mark the precise height of the view. From the center of this horizontal line a second piece of string is hung with a triangular weight (known as a plumb) tied to the end for the purpose of stabilizing the vertical line, which bisects the space of perspective into two equal parts. Lopez then shovels the patch of ground on which he means to stand in front of the canvas so as to slightly lower and level his own perspective, and drives into it two long nails right at the toes of both his shoes, effectively immobilizing himself as steadily and helplessly as the tree itself. We see him wriggle into this anchored stance the way a golfer settles his body into a balanced equation between the ball and its intended destination. From here decisions will be made – irrevocably followed through – and others avoided – irrevocably closed off. Not just the

coordinates marked by the nails but the entire Cartesian setup places Lopez, with each new day, back into the same position at the apex of a triangle where a relation with the canvas and the tree is preserved at all costs. His feet in perfect line with the trunk and square in front of the canvas, Lopez's perception is channeled through two angles of vision, discontinuous yet symmetrical, which can therefore only open one at a time depending on his focus: at the canvas or at the tree – the representation on the one hand and the passive resistance of the model on the other. Next he consolidates the vertical axis by drawing it on the canvas, after which he lays a thick white line of paint, straight from the tube, along the midpoint of the brick wall encompassing the entire courtyard, forming a makeshift horizon used to draw the horizontal axis. Lastly, just when it appears that Lopez has taken every conceivable measure to ensure that his chosen position remains fixed in accordance with the principles of symmetry and perspective, before applying paint to the canvas for the first time, standing on the threshold or now the precipice of the beginning itself, he turns the brush unexpectedly towards the tree to vertically bisect a sample of leaves and its trunk with white lines of paint.

There is much that can be made of the significance of all these preparatory movements and measurements and marks (as the setting up or coordination of significance). There is perhaps an entire drama detailing some very revealing (and some very modern) aesthetic criteria for the sanctioning of meaning and justification of value via representation within a disenchanted, that is, “meaningfully meaningless” or “contingency-ridden,” world of an age. But to go ahead and explore the narrative of that drama, extrapolating it from its specific treatment in the film, would be to leave the language of the film behind, forgoing the film's own dramatic process, its matrix of

revelation and expression, which interprets at the same time as it appears to document events “out of its control.” Whatever interpretation I might be *after* thus cannot be had or even justifiably known without working with a film that is working itself out in terms of its very own and which I am to learn *not* in place of my own terms of understanding but as additions to and criticisms of them. In referring again to the “language” of the film, I begin to try to make good on a promise to do better than refer to the moments of participation or paralleling between the film’s process and that of the painter’s – as if simply making these connections constituted a discovery of what they are in connection *about* – by reading the style and structure as organically investigative, amounting *over time* to a critique of the painter’s realist approach, and of painting’s claim to realism itself, that emerges, in a way that strikes me as survivalist, from a set of seemingly neutral observations of painting’s more discreetly “parodic” critique of cinema’s ontological propensity for realism as such. Cinema and painting, which normally proceed in accordance with their own technical and historical configurations of space and time, when put face to face cease to look the other way and so reflect each other’s distortions; and in this self-conscious frenzy, this symbiotic scrutiny and interrogation, one finds its beginning where the other loses out to its ending and vice versa, keeping a piece of the other’s dream of aesthetic totalization while still having to coincide and collaborate and conflict but on opposite sides of the *same* dream to represent the unrepresentable in an age where artistic creation is far too conscious of its own mediation to support an absolute. When the subject of a work of art is such that an encounter with the essence of another art is documented, the essence so encountered is raised to the surface of its own otherness, and stares the most penetrating stare as the object that stares back. In *Dream of*

Light, cinema, on the receiving end of painting's near inward stare, and in the light of its own incessant outward staring or exposing, is exposed *as it is*, which in the end can only turn out to be *for what* it is: a model face with nothing behind it, an autonomous automatism or "spiritual automaton,"¹³ or just the lens of an eye with everything out in front of it – everything ahead of it and to look forward to – and hence nothing in the world that could turn away from it except the moving images produced as a result of the world's vigilant "stand" – images from which the camera must turn, as though on a hinge, in order to be able to receive the revelation that is the world itself.

I do not mean to give the impression, however, that the subject of cinema in *Dream of Light* has the same overt presence as the subject of painting, nor that the filmmaker is as much a flesh and blood protagonist as the painter. Though I am just as reluctant to relegate the role of film and the presence of the filmmaker to the "dark cell" of implicit or latent intentionality just because the film waits until the end to explicitly refer to itself or finds that it can end only by way of exhibiting self-reference. It is firmly within the evidence of this film that the autonomous presence of the medium manifests as the aesthetic gestures to which it is put to use for the sake of thought, or the narrating of thought, or "thinking," and not only the narrating of events in a story that could only *personify* thought. Despite his comparatively "hands-off" labor, the feeling of the filmmaker's intimate proximity to the individual shots and juxtapositions of shots and, though less intimately, certain overarching sounds, is as much a reminder of how fundamentally integral a medium is to any given artistic manifestation (be it content or form) no matter how little its maker appears to have physically done to actualize the

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 156, including footnote #1.

medium in terms of the manifestation. In our case, the self-conscious appearance of film due to its open confrontation with painting reveals not the presence of the director but rather that the presence of “the director” is inseparable from the presence of the medium being directed. Hence, when a work of art is left, say, to the devices of convention or to its own inherent devices (methods representative, although hardly exhaustive, of mainstream and avant-garde camps), “the creator” is either *nowhere* to be found or *everywhere* lost as long as we remain committed to such a concept as existing “outside” and “before” and “independently” of the creation itself.

The first incident between medium and manifestation (Cinema and “painting”) that struck me as being impossibly or nonsensically coincidental (hence more or less intentional) occurs during the sequence I already described of Lopez’s extremely methodical process of preparation. Erice films this process in such a way as to establish a symmetry, or the look of an affinity, between Lopez’s method of securing the coordinates of his composition before proceeding to paint and the act of fitting photographic frames to individual yet interconnected elements of the world. Just as Lopez used some basic principles of symmetry to construct the canvas at the beginning of the film, so he enforces similar principles upon his perception of the quince tree by placing it at the very center of what he sees. Erice, while sharply and steadily observing Lopez throughout these procedures, frames the painter’s use of symmetry with the same principle of and tendency towards symmetry in his own compositions. For example, when Lopez marks the center of his view of the tree with the vertical plumb line, Erice sets up a frame that will end up placing the plumb itself at the center of the image as soon as Lopez leaves it to rest, as if he were receiving it in the spirit in which it will be put to use – a striking,

almost obsessively deliberate spatially timed gesture that surely suggests a similarly methodical if not an analogous method of preparation on behalf of the filmmaker.

Another instance comes immediately after when Lopez uses a ruler to trace the vertical axis on the canvas. Even though this action occurs within a fundamentally different, smaller and more limited dimension, Erice still ensures that the drawing of that line is positioned directly at the center of the moving image. As Erice continues to visually parallel Lopez's use of symmetry in what amounts to a kind of reinforcement or indulgence of each other's artistic methods and habits and tastes, the film begins to make apparent that two people in charge of their respective mediums can move stride for stride towards contradictory ends – ends, not goals, that will ultimately characterize the necessary conditions of entirely self-sufficient albeit *succeeding* art forms. What I mean to suggest is that regardless of which art came first, despite the fact that painting precedes and thus helps shape cinema in great measure, cinema and painting along with the other arts all possess conditions whose potentialities invariably sentence them to limitations rarely experienced by artists as the limits they are unless another art form (perhaps one not yet born) is found and felt and then properly acknowledged to possess *as conditions* those very limits.

The question that immediately comes to mind after pointing out this type of association or convergence between content and form, as it were, is whether the equality conveyed between artistic methodologies is an act of aesthetic characterization, perhaps miming on Erice's part, or if, somewhat on the other hand, it is a more natural instance of reciprocal identification internal to the two art forms at work in the film. In defense of the latter, I wish to point out that Lopez's employment of the principle of symmetry

throughout his preparations – and which I have singled out in two of the more exemplary occasions – is the first aesthetic value towards which the film's images show their unabashed support.¹⁴ His use of symmetry in relation to a staunchly realist form of painting seems to function in this scene both to cue and corroborate the cinematic participation in the purely aesthetic dimensions of the principle. Symmetry, therefore, is more the occasion than the cause of the film's first instance of a decisive reconciliation of content and form over a particular issue (a point of potential disagreement), as opposed to a mere mirroring (or symmetry) between the two. By enacting the depiction on a formal level, by replying to as opposed to repeating Lopez's methodological designs, Erice is able to reflect upon, or rather open a way for us to reflect upon, the integrity and viability of symmetry as a contemporary artistic choice. Why, indeed, has so much stress and trust been placed on the shoulders of symmetry in aesthetics in general across the arts, particularly the visual arts? Is it because our sense of the beautiful, what strikes us as beautiful right off the bat, is conditioned, for whatever reasons, by orderliness? Do we

¹⁴ This form of demonstrative support or agreement is to be distinguished from the more conventional device commonly found in the biopic genre (of which *Dream of Light* is by no means a member, save through counterexample) of representing the perspective and inner world of the artist through the lens or guise of his or her aesthetics. What this convention seems to do is personify the external world as the reflection of a protagonist's internal world as a way to both exteriorize the internal and interiorize the external, configuring reality beyond recognition by bringing the concerns of narrative to bear excessively upon the visual, resulting all too often in a bastardization of expressionism. This sort of approach, more importantly, reveals very little about the stance or opinion of the film towards the artist's life and work and the costs on each, unless it is of the opinion that the life of the artist is best explored through the art of film by merely conflating life and art, which can be rather easily and even effectively achieved (or rendered convincing) by remaining oblivious to all the tensions between them – to the world standing *in between* and never *for* either one. Not to mention all the neglected tension and telltale incommensurability there is between film as art and film's peculiarly submissive attraction to famous artists (few of which, incidentally, have been filmmakers fictionalized in their own form).

continue to comfortably reify semblances of perfection because no mere artifice could ever make any serious or urgent claims upon the organic and oftentimes inextricable messiness of a life? Or is symmetry less about fantasizing the perfection of the world – as a result, say, of imperfections unleashed by our being-in-the-world – than of finding ways of balancing the chaos that threatens our appreciation of the balance – indeed the symmetry, the perfection – *between* order and chaos? One thing *Dream of Light* helps to illuminate about such questions is that the start of answering them might turn out to depend on *which art form in which age* has been taken to the task of art and whether or not a particular artist is able and willing to admit the particular history of his or her chosen art – full of triumphs and failures and the triumph of compromise and the failure of the masterpiece to trump its day and age – to join him on the brink of what only appears to be a new beginning in the face of new work and dull his sense of taste, particularly for what satisfies the senses alone.

In conversation with a Japanese admirer or critic, Lopez responds to her fondness for the refined compactness of his compositions by confessing to an unconditional adoption of the principle of symmetry. He hints at the reasons for imposing such a rigid frame of reference upon his creative freedom in the following way: “Here and in general, I like the order created by symmetry. I centered the tree on the paper. The heart of the vision is the center of the paper.” His objective, I gather, is to make the object of his perception not only the focus or center of the painting but also the painting itself. It seems to me that the most compelling reason for why he would want to commit himself to such an aggressively head-on approach is, despite all odds, to clear the dimension of form in such a way that the content can pass through it and show up in it and thus appear, as it

were, in its *own* form. After receiving the explanation from her translator, the woman responds by noting, “A lot of artists avoid doing this because people don’t seem to like it.” “That may be,” Lopez retorts, “but doing it this way the tree, in my opinion, has presence. By centering it, by avoiding all aesthetic games on paper with space, the object is shown in an ordered way in relation to symmetry.” To this I wish to ask: Is Lopez’s method of painting, particularly his elaborate method of preparing to paint, a form, a physical formation, of skepticism? (I am recalling the comment a colleague of his makes while taking in all the tactics of Cartesianesque constraint surrounding the poor unassuming quince tree: “It seems mistrustful.”) What could Lopez have doubts about? The existence of the tree as a part of the external world, standing apart from his own consciousness of it, thus “existing” only *within* his consciousness? Probably not, for the idea of realism is based less on the need to *prove* that something exists than a desire to show *that* it exists. Perhaps he might doubt that the quince tree is actually *the subject* of the painting, or that the painting which stands in between him and his own natural relation to the tree is *actual* – doubts not over the existence of the tree itself or the painting itself but rather the tree’s existence *in* and *as* a painting that is to reveal nothing except “the quince tree” in an age where painting has been lead to reveal nothing except the power of revelation, or form, to make content out of consciousness. The tree *as* content may have been known long in advance to the point where even the method for its measured realization was thoroughly put into place, but that does not mean such content is *certain*, nor that the method is anything more than a futile attempt to *objectify* such certainty.¹⁵

¹⁵ Throughout the entire preparation scene (whose duration Erice in essence shortens but

Lopez's idea of justifying an aesthetic approach by avoiding what he calls aesthetic games marks a potentially self-defeating ambition, fueled perhaps by nothing more than the humblest wish, to return to the essence of artistic content by way of the concept of content or even the form of content, perhaps to redeem the force of content itself in an age of aesthetic games, by pitting form against itself and in doing so dodging any formal strategy whose value is present and applied *a priori* to content – all as a means of realizing an image of absolute content. This method of cleansing form, of rendering form transparent through the logic of symmetry, is inspired, according to Lopez, by a certain moral subservience to the tree itself as a form of life. With a calm air of conviction reminiscent of final words or of words repeated one too many times, Lopez says to the admirer/critic that his entire process of preparation (the horizontal and vertical lines, the two nails in the ground, the white marks on the quinces . . .) is designed only to ensure that he remain parallel at all times with the tree's development and death over time. Both the woman and the translator seem satisfied, even impressed with this explanation. But is such patient servility to the tree honorable in the end to the responsibilities of painting if Lopez's primary interest and profoundest pleasure is to be *with it* throughout the course of its picture perfect autumn death? Only the painting itself,

in effect lengthens through the use of dissolves within the same continuous wide shot) Lopez takes steps that would appear to have been taken as precautions against the silent and reposing yet inevitable and always immanent forces of contingency alive within the object of the representation. And yet, despite all that, it also seems that none of Lopez's many constraining preparations can make him make the first stroke, which is the opening decision – and conviction – of the painting. His preparations – and this is the secret we keep from ourselves while preparing for anything – make him into the one who *must* make it, alone (more alone the more you prepare). But there can be no way to know, at the beginning of knowing, when and where and on what grounds to set limits for the process of coming-to-know (and know when enough is enough), because the when and where and grounds of that beginning were just as uncertain (no less spontaneous and arbitrary and unstable).

left standing by itself, can rise or fall to the occasion of its “completion,” accepting or rejecting the responsibility it has to function first and foremost as a picture and not as a trace of or testament to some personal, deeply phenomenological and ultimately unrepresentable quest. But the deeper question as to whether or not it is possible (not to mention logical and desirable) at the close of the 20th century for an artist to completely bypass or override the ancient, perhaps unconscious lure of the aesthetic to negotiate the most difficult and pervasive and enduring of differences by sharpening their similarities, is one that the moving images in *Dream of Light* work to confront through the “perceptual irony” of their heightened transparency. This degree of transparency reaches irony in relation to moving images of still-life intensity, revealing the opacity internal to *any* image by showing how obvious but invisible – difficult and illogical and sometimes undesirable – the difference is between an image and the world, regardless how seamless or persuasive or pure the quality of transparency in a painting or photograph or film or conscious and unconscious states – all represented in one way or another in the film – may be.¹⁶

¹⁶ So Lopez’s realism as a painter lies in a responsibility to the particularity of the quince tree in his perception, while Erice’s realism as a filmmaker is evident in a responsibility to his perception of the particularity of reality itself in all its changing and recurrent manifestations. But let’s stop ourselves if we haven’t done so already by raising the questions of this genuinely puzzled critic: “Why paint this way? Why make a film this way?” (William Johnson, “*Dream of Light*,” in *The Cinema of Victor Erice: An Open Window*, p. 178-179) Why use art to present the reality in which we live? Do we not live there? Do we not face it? Let’s assume for now that for the most part we don’t live there nor face it, how can this type of art show us where to look if it asks us to look in the opposite direction, that is, at an image – *our* image (as Nietzsche would no doubt hammer home)? What is our relationship to reality if it is more common today than ever before that we look to experience it – and experience it best – through the eyes of others? (Whether or not it is useful and wise to relate to reality “artistically” in reality itself would be the next (bigger) question.) If we consider the sort of relationship that a visual artist of today might have with the *subject* of reality, the assertion of reality as idea or

Two moments from the preparation sequence are worth mentioning here. While the first occurs in a single image and the other across a juxtaposition, both establish an impression of reality that, despite the illusion of being as concrete as reality itself, refers back to the mode of perception and means of construction that made it an image of the world in the first place. I'm thinking of the close-up of Lopez's feet as he hammers the nails at the toes of his shoes so as to mark his position in front of the canvas. The shot is as discreet and unpunctuated as all the visual documents that came before it; it is also as luminously clear as the daylight that exposed it, receiving the same even distribution of light that allows us to see before us exactly what we are doing. And yet Lopez's action in the shot (which he does, it would appear, for the sake of his own work and not that of the film's) reveals not only a trait of Erice's action at the time of filming but also an aspect of his method as a filmmaker, and which may have only been vaguely felt by the viewer as an arbitrary quality of the film's handling of reality: the constant use of static compositions. Both artists, in turns out, commit themselves decisively and no less repeatedly to a fixed point from which to either record or depict a perceptual relationship, almost as though the relationship that is perception depended for them on the stillness of the perceiver to receive intact the object of perception, say, by tracking the point at which subject becomes object and object becomes subject. What unfolds here as a simple view

dream or social utopia would seem to require something of a blind assertion, a total faith, a profound appeal to of reality "itself" to take hold of an image or in the very least take part in one. This would be the case, I think, because the disenchantment of nature (as a cultural and intellectual event, what Nietzsche called a "de-deification") has reached a point in our collective consciousness where the desire for re-enchantment, of our relationship to nature or our own human nature, will depend on sharp states of consciousness letting down their guard by emerging from behind the screen of intellectual conscience – "Beware! Beware!" – to do everything left in their power to allow reality to show just how powerful (or not) it is.

of Lopez deciding where he is going to stand for the duration of the painting process, folds back into a two-way image of identification between the filmmaker's stance and that of the painter's. For the harsh task of representing reality, both artists will station the body so that the eye can gather up as much of the material world as it can within a single viewpoint. This is perhaps how the eye attains power of primacy within the artistic decision of Lopez and Erice, receiving the most confidence and hence pressure from them; and yet it would appear that it does so under a false pretext, for as much as the eye affirms the presence of the world beyond it through the act of seeing it affords, in order for that act to give way to the world it must lose sight of the eye that it never stops seeing *with*. The secret opacity of sight has a kind of confidant in the capacity for a moving image of the world to stare at itself, or to direct attention towards its surface, by exhibiting the many mirror images (call them metaphors for imaging) proffered in the world. Such an image as the one I described, beyond revealing itself within what it shows, has also revealed precisely what it has done, and what images have to do, to be able to do just that. In doing so there is the sense, hotter than a trace, of a missing perceiver (somewhere behind, left behind, casting a faint and even shadow over everything) that the flush transparency of the image failed to factor, that is, lest the entire image turn inwards and perception introspect, both against the grain of their naturally forward and open orientation.

The second moment in question continues this mode of "outward reflection" upon the stillness of the body as a sort of gateway to a totality of vision not unlike Emerson's

dream of becoming but a single transparent eye.¹⁷ The juxtaposition I referred to earlier begins when Lopez, after rooting himself in front of the canvas, finally turns to face the quince tree from the spot from which he will paint it in the coming months, and closes one eye, his left eye, leaving his right eye open wide. The following shot registers as a point-of-view shot of the midpoint of the horizontal piece of string bent by the weight of the plumb dangling below. We seem to be all but obliged to perceive this shot as an extension of Lopez's point of view, almost as if a reflex had been triggered by the force of convention (or consensus) surrounding the logic of a cut, in this case from perceiver to perceived to draw a linear connection across the disparate times and spaces of two distinct images. But the true logic of a cut, however, dictates that the next shot depicting the next moment in Lopez's process of preparation is always *at the same time* the next point in Erice's process of filming him. Thus Lopez's one-eyed view of the midpoint of his perspectival grid is paralleled, once again, by Erice's view, which is also a one-eyed view, as all film images are, of the camera lens. The experience of filming the world becomes, very suddenly, and near imperceptibly (perhaps because unintentionally) interestingly and insightfully referenced during this rudimentary exchange of shots as one in which the perceptual powers of depth of field and peripheral expansiveness are sacrificed for the desire to contain or stabilize the porous nature of perception through the power to precisely frame and focus perception telescopically. The camera, we are reminded, enables the filmmaker behind it – not to mention everyone else who works from behind to wrought what the camera alone can record – to shut an eye and view *as a whole* what remains still a piece.

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode in collaboration with Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1981), p. 11.

At this point I hope it is safe to say that *Dream of Light*, through a shot-by-shot reciprocation of the painter's extremely rigorous preparatory procedure, has begun to introduce the medium of film on some sort of even par with that of painting, at least with respect to the perceptual tasks of realism. With Lopez as ready as can be to finally start painting, and with Erice having used the methodological characteristics of that elaborate beginning as a measure of his own method of documentation, I find myself in the position to pose a question that has been weighing on me and which nearly fell from the tip of my tongue a bit earlier: Could the fact that Erice begins *Dream of Light* with the beginning of a creative process suggest that the medium of film in relation to painting somehow managed to exempt Erice (still a figment of the film's imagination) from having to confront (as Lopez did in the reality of the film) the mercilessly high and pressure-filled demand of those determinant opening stages of preparation and planning – the beginning? How can the documentary filmmaker in particular hope to take, so as to pass, the same self-imposed test as Lopez's beginning, which can be said (without hesitation) to test the integrity of the pact between endurance of will and sincerity of intent before going ahead into the battle for truth? The question as to whether or not the filmmaker is obliged to begin under the same excruciating, seemingly *ex-nihilo* circumstances as the painter, is one that must somehow rattle "the conscience" of the film itself.¹⁸

¹⁸ Erice's frequent use of dissolves to pure white screens (call them canvases of light) between segments (seeming to break up the film into chapters) can open the debate by helping us pose the next logical question: On what grounds can Erice "claim" by way of these non-images of light that the film frame is as blank at the beginning as the painter's canvas? One way in which such a claim could be true of the film would be to say that the editing of the shots, as opposed to their specific contents, models and invariably contends with the blankness specific to the threshold of writing. (Of course this is not to say – going more or less without saying – that language is something entirely blank on which our thoughts find their first and strongest expression.) Lopez begins the painting by

But what can one mean by *conscience* in relation to a work of art, in this case a work of the cinema? The prospect here is hard to make out, and no easier to discern in art than to measure and authentically demonstrate in life. The idea of conscience, that is, of *having* a conscience, places it discreetly below the surface of consciousness, or high up on a mantle at the apex of ethics, or way off in the most distant corners of the imagination where we're often at our best – somewhere beside ourselves however much in tandem. But as long as we're trying it on for size, perhaps a clue to the feeling of it fitting can be found in the film's many solitary and precarious digressions away from Lopez's painting process towards other people, other practices and pastimes, an entire city day and night, which flood the open door of the camera while held firmly at bay by the brick wall of the canvas. I'm quite comfortable calling these digressions *circles of acknowledgement* after the best of intentions working behind them, but allow me to come back to this intuition to attribute conscientiousness to the acts of digression in *Dream of Light* until I've set the stage for them and thought through some of them in the hopes of gaining some criteria for a type of agency – film? filmmaker? filmmaking? cinema itself? – that any case for such an act will ultimately depend on.

Lopez is the undisputed “main character” and “protagonist” of Erice's film despite the fact that he walks in his own shoes, is who the character is, and stars in a “documentary” on *him*. Because of that, we might look to Lopez – as much as scriptwriters and directors can be said in general to rely on characters like Lopez – to

starting to paint directly in the middle of the canvas, unlike Erice who must write with images one after another in the editing room. The tool of the dissolve, deployed across and within shots, can then be read as a way of resisting following one shot with the next and being led by one moment to the next according to the custom of linear/causal narrative structures, drawing more from the associations of poetry and the simultaneities of painting than, say, the successiveness of literature.

fulfill a fundamental requirement of fictional paradigms: to serve as an anchoring device that stabilizes the narrative fabric by winding it tight around a root consciousness or perspective so that all the surrounding directions or detours in which individual threads split off never quite run off the map. But this image of a human being singled out above all others, placed at the center of a story and functioning in a film as an anchor to reality, is only partly accurate, for the act of “dropping anchor” through the introduction of a character or human being – and Lopez is an ideal example because he is so clearly both – simultaneously introduces a complex set or network of circumstances to which they belong and participate in constituting. The narrative convention of selecting *this* human being to experience the experience of others existing in relation creates an impact on the reality of the narrative as a whole, one whose resonance has the power to undercut the ultimate function of this basic convention to maintain focus on the source. In other words, the circumstances in which someone, real or not, is found or made to exist as a primary character (significant in defining and even determining potential circumstances), are as much the subject of the characterization as who he or she is and becomes, which essentially means that the circumstances themselves are implicated long before the identity and trajectory of the character hit the bottom to steady the ship of the narrative, as it were, because nothing less than a relationship with those immanent circumstances is required to identify them. Implication of circumstance, in the case of Lopez, is the logical outcome of casting a human being in the role of a main character even if he is to play himself. But what form of authorship would hold those circumstances, immediate and distant alike, revealing and irrelevant all the same, to be as important – as relevant and revealing on their own terms – as the characters they all help to characterize? Why give

priority to the ripples – the contingent effects – in place of their cause? Who – what authorial perspective – is concerned with their roll out to sea, following them fizzle out or crash into another current, instead of officially commencing duty on deck by plotting a specific course? Perhaps we are talking about the sort of author who operates by casting stones instead of dropping anchors, or who sets his course to the North Star so that he will not be tempted to venture deep into the gale of an unchecked intuition.

In what follows I am going to try to come to terms with such an approach to documentary film narration that is as embracing of the surrounding and continuous forms of human, natural and technological existence – lived existence – as a river whose crawling pace winding through the land is perfectly steady and unchanging and self-directed. Acknowledging the same contingencies of perception gathered by the recording devices of camera and microphone, the approach investigates in a manner I'm tempted to call "epistemological" a thoroughly conscious (and potentially conscientious) form of being in the world afforded by the experience of what is commonly referred to as the production or shooting stage of the filmmaking process.¹⁹

¹⁹ The stage where scripted or unscripted material is filmed on real locations or constructed sets or combinations thereof has been dramatically influenced and in many cases altogether replaced by the digitization of the image. Here is a medium that essentially enables the painterly manipulation, composite construction and synthetic generation of moving images through the use of computer software alone. Although I shall not argue here for the value of directly filming the world currently under threat by the capacity to artificially "film" (except by first admitting the validity of the counterargument that the future possibilities of an art always depend more on the use of its present conditions – whatever they are – than a persistent seeking of an elusive or past essence), I wish to make known some convictions of mine regarding the possibilities available to film specifically through the actual filming (on film or video) of images and which the purely digital creation stands to lose, convictions I bring to the rest of my discussion of a film that goes a long way in demonstrating grounds for having them (although cannot be said to have first awakened them in my thinking). The act of shooting a film *somewhere* in the world before taking it "out" of the world to edit occurs

Sometimes the best way to begin taking awareness of what a work of art is doing *differently* is to ask ourselves what it is *not* doing that it *could* be doing had it failed to overcome the formulas or clichés which so often dictate artistic decisions. Aside from an interestingly revealing formal strategy, we have until this point seen *Dream of Light* following the straightest of lines, beginning with Lopez building the canvas, followed by his preparations prior to painting and culminating with the beginning of the painting itself. After Lopez wraps up the opening session of painting, he is shown cleaning a bundle of brushes in a room that is by far the drabest in the film. This is one of those chores that every painter, no matter how high his head in the clouds (or deep in his dreams), must descend to the ground of the everyday to toil in the mud of time's never-ending reprieve. These moments of extreme mundaneness so prone to boredom will, however, soon pass, like those of wildest intensity, as though they never were, and will be relinquished perhaps for an event that better fulfills our criteria for what we call

in the world, which essentially allows for all the possibilities that come with being in the world, or through being in a world of possibilities, to come. Most of the time these possibilities are neither here nor there with respect to the filmmaker's artistic intentions, though the triviality and apparent impotency of these possibilities can sometimes present problems for or even solutions to the practical realization of complex preconceptions. But the meddling of contingency in the affairs of intentionality is only half the story. The other half starts when filmmakers find themselves stranded without a plan or skeptical about their plans or accountable for the lack of a plan, but where something can nevertheless be staged or caught in concert with things as they appear "on the day." By beginning *again*, this time in a world that is *all there*, that is "finished," the experience of beginning *for the first time* – "for real" – strikes every time a decision is to be made. And if chance is *used* instead of opposed or ignored or unconditionally ceded, then nothing is actually "left to chance" that is not in some sense reclaimed as necessary at the time and, perhaps, as deliberate in retrospect. What proves vital "after the fact" (when all facts have been put to the test) is *this fact here*, which the filmmaker could not have known to be worth proving and so did not know was to be so true. (Erice consolidates the point for me when he goes so far as to declare the following conviction in an interview: "I believe there is more art in the shooting of images than in the images themselves." Laurence Giavarini et Thierry Jousse, "Entretien avec Victor Erice et Antonio Lopez," *Cahiers du Cinema* (no. 457): 34. Translation courtesy of Giovanna Masella.)

“fiction,” and the film will move on. If this film were steady on the path of traditional documentary film structure, from which point would it take its cue to proceed via the heavily trafficked course through, let us say, a mystery that lies exposed on the surface to a solution pulled out of the depths of time where all the floating pieces of events are found in the end to be part of the same puzzle? My thought here is that when the events of a narrative appear to be going more or less according to plan, we do not sincerely ask ourselves or anyone else (unless we mean to reassure ourselves) where the story is going, because the empowered feeling of being in the hold of a fixed set of reliable hypotheses for the outcome of events is precisely the point of our participation, or indulgence, in the “mystery” of those outcomes. The question becomes not so much what is going to happen next but rather whether or not what comes to pass is what was expected, for or against one’s wishes. A disinterested uncertainty, on the other hand, the kind that simply follows a film that has managed to find its own way through the gaze, can’t ask (with any sincerity) any questions at all about the future, nor of the past as a way of anticipating it, as long as the film is the kind that exposes naked the very mystery – wordless idea – that sentences both it and us to wakefulness.

Using (and indulging) the metaphor I proposed earlier of Erice approaching the centrality of Lopez like a stone (as opposed to an anchor) dropped in water, what follows can be seen as a circle by circle as opposed to a shot by shot (though sometimes a circle lasts no longer than a shot) description of the concentric as opposed to causal development of the ensuing digressions. Such a sketch, however, will probably be the most useful for a reader who hasn’t seen the film, although in lieu of its disappointing

availability in North America (on film or digital forms) a reader whose position I am all too eager to respect and, perhaps also for my own pleasure, to vicariously re-inhabit.

- Three men arrive through the familiar gate that leads to the yard and enter the studio building. They proceed to a dark lit room where they change into work clothes.
- Lopez returns to the courtyard where the quince tree stands and takes his post in front of the canvas. – The sound of heavy hammering.
- A young man asleep in a room in the studio house is awakened by the sound. He gets up, walks past a group of paintings leaning against a wall and opens a window. – The sound of a man announcing through a megaphone attached to a car of his interest in buying whatever his neighbors might be eager to sell streams into the room.
- A middle-aged woman arrives through the gate and crosses paths with the young man on her way to the studio house. They have a brief conversation.
- The woman sees two of the laborers on her way upstairs and asks each a question about the progress of some renovations.
- A close-up through a magnifying glass of the woman's hand engraving floral designs, followed by a medium shot and a wide shot of the same action occurring in a studio.
- Lopez sings a song while painting some white marks on a leaf and a quince.
- A train passes in between a cluster of apartment buildings.
- Lopez continues to sing and paint. – “Many painters come from Madrid . . .”

- The train passes by a boy playing with a ball in a semi-open space. A female voice tells him to go check on the baby. The camera follows him to a small house where a woman in a blue dress is folding clothes. – The sound of Lopez singing.
- In the distance someone hangs clothes to dry on the porch of a small house. – Lopez sings.
- A nondescript brick building with boarded-up windows. – Lopez sings.
- A dog lies on a sidewalk in the sun in front of a small house where a television glows inside a dark room. – Lopez sings.
- The camera pans from the train moving through an underpass to a wall with graffiti on it that reads “death’s spark” below a drawing of a needle. – The singing stops.
- Lopez explains to the woman in a warm and easy manner his hopes for the painting, revealing the few brief times during the day where the sun shines the desired light.
- Five still life shots of Lopez’s empty workspace and the courtyard at dusk.
- Two of the workers look at Lopez’s painting in its infancy and wonder about the white marks painted directly on the tree.
- A dog barks in a shed or gazebo.
- The three workers who converse in Polish practice their Spanish in the dim sitting room.
- The room is now empty except for a few things left behind by the workers.
- The young man from before works on three different paintings and then sits down to look at them without appearing to turn his head from one to another.

- Two young women examine Lopez's canvas before fitting him with new jacket and shoes. The shoes are one size too small.
- Lopez resumes painting while a news broadcast begins on a radio placed on the ground nearby.
- The news broadcast continues over shots of dark clouds rolling in across the skyline.
- Madrid at night. A train moves in between apartment buildings. Many apartment windows flicker with TV illumination.
- The quince tree and empty easel stand side by side under the moonlit night.
- The canvas stands against an abstract black background.
- A man of about the same age as Lopez arrives at the studio house for a visit.

My question is still, very simply, why it is that Erice chose to follow up the beginning of his documentary on Lopez's artistic process *this* way – through a concentric series of existences running parallel with the painter's "core" existence – and which is so strikingly different from any other way I had encountered before in both documentary and fiction film. What is the purpose, not to mention the potential significance, of digressing from the central object of attention and identification and investigation (especially only a short time after embracing it) towards the nearest available ring of everyday human existence, and then, again after only a short time, towards the next and nearest ring, and onward, getting further and further away from the onset? Why turn away from what stands singled out in front to whatever is beside, regardless of what it is and whether it would have stood out in the first place? And what, in the context of a

narrative, could be the intention or the mentality behind this act of digressing or turning-away so as to stand-forth and gather-up?

In a film whose wide array of images nevertheless gravitate toward, and even make a vigil upon, the painter at work on *the same* image, these digressions, particularly those that stretch beyond the immediate vicinity of the studio house, amount to far more than “still life” interludes of time’s incessant and languorous flow to which they might on a first viewing appear reducible. Throughout subsequent viewings, the more I reflected on the peculiarly detached, almost Brechtian intensification of my own experience of these sequences, the more I came to see in nearly each of the individual shots or views comprising them an acknowledgement of the surrounding urban, social and quotidian world that the painter had no choice but to exclude – and perhaps felt the exclusion pang – in concentrating so undividedly and faithfully on his *chosen* subject. They are thus readable, to my mind, as conscientious attempts at recovering that which the attention of the painter, especially through the concrete exertions of sight, entails he go blind to as a sacrifice for striving to see as much of the little he can. If we cared to extrapolate a mini parable from the logic of this trade-off, these circles of acknowledgement could be understood as redeeming the blindness we’re forced to assume – to thrive on – in order to see at all, and through the same principle psychology uses to redeem forgetting and account for repression as rich aspects of our human survival. But in doing so, such a parable must also present in action the moral that the harder and longer one sees, for the sake of succeeding to see just one thing perhaps no greater than a tree, the more one must

risk going completely deaf even to the belief that there is a world ongoing.²⁰ If our desire to concentrate on something, to fully attend to the demands of the particular, escalates to the point where it yields such consequences, such a symptom the kind of which is actually agreeable to the sufferer, then it seems that the sacrifice of “the rest” – an ocean of particulars which we navigate with the help of generalizations like “the particular” – must end up compromising part of what is so precious about the detail. Of course, losses suffered for the sake of the detail, in honor of the one thing still too multiple to handle, are not only inevitable but also necessary, for otherwise everything is lost, everything there is to gain from attention to *the thing*, that seemingly single singularity, which marks the difference between experiencing something in the world for itself and merely pretending to (perhaps for the sake of a generalization). Another danger arises when passion for one’s own experience becomes protective, sealing oneself inside one’s own interests rather than using its power to challenge and upset and attempt to break through those interests, where the losses as opposed to the gains of experience become the main purpose *behind* passion.²¹

²⁰ This is especially the case if one is not careful amidst states of deep absorption and high concentration to now and then check the tendency for the smallest part – *what* and *that* we perceive and attend to *in our consciousness* – to appear representative and exhaustive and sometimes even superior to the larger “whole” of other parts and others partial to other parts: all that we *don’t* perceive in a given perception and that we are *not* (and so cannot *be*) any other perceiving person.

²¹ If turned into a habit this motive can become threateningly disease-like, corrupting one’s standards of self-worth, wasting the soul of a life that, say, lives only to work, and thus has nothing to do and nowhere to turn while “off the line” except to the wall for sleep, almost as if what such a soul does *in* or *with* life has next to no bearing upon its own life that is its to burn, another case where quantity fails to add up to anything resembling quality in the end. A tangible measure of accomplishment can remain but a trophy on the mantelpiece, an object presiding above and beyond the reach of its earner, if the plan for life is to accumulate material for an epitaph – a feeble shelter against the

While the concept of *digression* is about as slippery as the events it refers to, one thing the sequences described above help make clear about their own digressions is to effortlessly rule out the possibility of attributing them to the sort of sensorially bombarded and hence easily distracted condition characteristic of so-called modern consciousness or modernity. Inviting as it is to read these digressions as expressions or vehicles of a fundamentally digressive art form, one whose deeply modern plight is thrown into even sharper relief by painting's comparatively premodern propensity for strict contemplation, there is nevertheless nothing jarring or spontaneous or overtly random about the casual introduction of the Polish workers. I want to say with respect to this decision that Erice does not appear to "drop" Lopez as a result of being drawn away by the lure of these fresh new faces arriving on the scene. Rather, it's as though he can't bring himself to avoid or plain accepts the fact of their arrival as human beings from that out-of-sight-out-of-mind "darkness" just beyond the narrow periphery of his own human existence. And that familiar darkness, home of the other, is not impenetrable for the camera in the way of a canvas. All this darkness holds and comes darting through is technically *in bounds* for the filmmaker, negotiable despite being off topic, thus having the power to dislocate and sometimes altogether undercut whatever the topic is taken to be. (We might in turn want to ask, in the wake of topics overtaken – Is there such *thing* as a topic?) While Lopez can perhaps take a certain comfort in the knowledge that the canvas ends where the world begins (flowing instead into the history and virtual present of pictures); Erice, on the other hand, must recognize, in its contrast with a canvas, that the camera's automatic reproduction of the world on film holds whoever holds (dear) a

sweeping storms of historical obscurity or, should it hold, a shelter fit only for one and for one's name only.

camera to an affirmation of the world itself in the form of some sort of faith or stake in its sheer power of presence. That affirmation, if accepted as a condition of the camera, witnesses the power of reality over fantasy, and by extension life over art, by deferring to the realm of contingency a certain ontological precedence over any and all aesthetic epistemologies (or claims to the contrary of what comes to pass), resulting in images which, despite their degree of depth in the world, are emphatically ephemeral – as lasting as their actual duration. In other words, while Lopez sets out to counter contingency by trying to capture it, Erice, by accepting contingency as having already “captured” the image, uses it – following it? – to investigate the potential for cinema to be poetically resigned to the world, as it were. But the filmmaker who accepts contingency also releases contingency, and is fated – blessed and cursed – to the paradox of having to follow the life that dwells just to the left or to the right but always outside the camera’s frame. The moment Erice turns away from Lopez to face the existence of the Polish workers who are definitely not painters, he puts the film into the position where the next view that he decides to show (or his character decides to film) will foreground something that films on the whole do so well to repress: the value judgment inherent in the act of *cutting*, performed by starting and stopping recorded shots, which starts by starting and stopping the camera, and before that by *placing* the camera – to *cut off* one view of the world for another view to which the camera is just as capable of holding fast, or affirming, and hence records *indiscriminately*.

In claiming that Erice approaches the cinematic cut as a digression mobilized by an inescapable act of value, I am not suggesting that there exist (or ought to exist) any criteria in which one cut could be found more superior or sound or justified than any

other. What a film shows *next*, what it does to show what for it *comes* next, is not perceivable as an act *per se* for the simple reason that a film is a finite set of expressive forms and modes of expressivity that amount more to a “language” than a constellation of actions amounting to something resembling a “moral character” (even though most films indeed rely upon “bits and pieces” of the world in which human actions do in fact occur, and through its own rules of syntax can construct from them a world so convincingly unified that its own construction – a full constellation of choices fully acted upon in the world itself – ends up all but masked). A cut to this shot or that shot from *this* shot might not meet any criteria, nor satisfy any intuition we might have, for decisive, impacting and accountable human action; and yet despite the crude simplicity and linguistic character of the cut I would still want to say that for every cut that is *visible*, that has been explicitly foregrounded in defiance of the convention of continuity editing or not completely erased by its total acceptance, so too is the impression of an agency²² which has put forth not a statement but an association (not between statements but across forms or notations of perspective). In a film like *Dream of Light*, where discrete images of the world are not bound together to form a seamless narrative continuum nor forced apart to prevent such a continuum from forming at all, a sense of agency (call it the gaze) is what holds them in place and is responsible for holding them *just so* one after another. Such a gaze, I want to say, can survive the cuts it performs by literally performing those cuts, so that a given cut can point back to an action that is as specific to – albeit not necessarily characteristic of –

²² Some have gone so far as to call this a “film mind,” granting aspects of a film or an entire film with *real* agency or a *sense* of “real” agency. Aside from being reluctant to proceed head first down such a treacherous path, I am not interested in going in this direction period, for it seems to take us away from the fact (fundamental to all art regardless of how immediate or life-like the experience) that whatever agency a film might have or posture is a voice from the past doomed to repeat itself.

the character of the filmmaker as any action performed by a character in the world of the film. A cinematic cut, in other words, attests, albeit only attests, to a decision that is either *expressed* through the subjective association of discrete parts as individual wholes or *unexpressed* (although by no means undecided) through the folding of such parts into the *expressed whole* of the film. I will not say that the former approach is necessarily more responsible or conscientious or more interesting or generative than the latter; I will say (or wish to say) that a style premised on the acknowledgement of its own fragments, to the point where it is forced to subsist on them for its means of expression, does constitute, at least to my thinking, a step forward in the articulacy and humanization of aesthetic imperfection. (Although if the style should become a style like any other, I see no reason why it should be valued more highly than any other, for *as* a style there is nothing to stop someone from using it to stylize – dehumanize and perfect – aesthetic processes of imperfection in the end.)

It is now worth considering Erice's own recollection of the circumstances under which the Polish workers inspired his interest and attention:

[...] They were there, that is where I met them. I vaguely knew about them before we started shooting, but I did not really know what they were doing. . . . On the first day, the sound engineer told me: "There are terrible sounds in the house. Somebody is hammering non-stop. Why don't you tell them to go away? They are really bothering us, and they might disturb the dialogue." But I insisted that it was

more important to respect reality, to keep going. . . . That is how we met the Polish workers. They were right away integrated into the film.²³

Erice's precariously bold digression to the three Polish workers, while an acknowledgement of their right to be there, is also an acknowledgement of cinema's right to be in the world, to document it from deep inside of it where those behind the camera continue to inhabit and belong to it – to partake in it – on the same grounds (albeit on different terms) as those out in front. That is how a meeting, perhaps to survive the duration of shooting, was struck with these people – by refusing to waive this right to continue living, to keep going. Bearing a certain pressure to respect whatever contingencies reality might dish out, he opts to be artistically conscientious by not getting in the way of them, which forces him to be somewhat artistically experimental by proceeding to integrate them into the film without much delay. As a consequence, his filmmaking becomes “experimental” here less through a desire to thwart convention than through the admittedly unconventional nature of his criteria for what he considers to be problems and solutions to intentions. And since his intentions seem to be as significantly attuned to the nature – some call it the “beast” – of filmmaking as to the film itself, problems with and solutions to their execution – the time and space of their realization – will reside equally beyond the reach and desire of intention. What I am referring to as his experimentation thus becomes a naturally skeptical as opposed to an artificially avoidant or destructive process towards the conventions or common solutions available within the genre of documentary (i.e. transforming an open location into a closed set) without

²³ Tomas Perez Turrent, “Entretien avec Victor Erice: La possibilite de reproduire les apparences,” *Positif* (May 1993): 10. Translation by Martine Thibonnier.

necessarily having to explicitly question those conventions and solutions purely (and perhaps senselessly) in the name of experimentation. In this sense it is possible to stretch a reading of Erice's digression away from Lopez to the workers as (the consequences of) a *full* acknowledgement of the intractable and contractual bond (faith in the *idea* of the index) between the spatio-temporal document and the world so documented, the very bond which comes to underlie and support in a self-effacing (or sacrificial) manner the appropriations of narrative conventions to symbolically structure that world. For even the making of a purely fictional and fictionalized world on film requires that the realities in the world (assuming the world itself was filmed) be simultaneously withheld and upheld for the sake of a plan (call it a script) for the world. Except in *Dream of Light* the inseparability of documentary and fiction as film's most fundamental modes is as if ontologically affirmed.

It is not faith in convention (for the most tried-and-true have no doubt earned our trust) but rather a lack of awareness that conventions are indeed constructions that permits possibilities inherent in the medium of film, or any art, to escape without alarm. It is a possibility of the mechanical nature of the camera, for instance, for Erice to show up on the day unprepared, or prepared to negotiate his preparations, or unwilling to execute any imagined preconceptions in order to be able to make concrete decisions on the spot. I already mentioned that Erice did not know in advance of filming the film he was going to make, though perhaps on this occasion he understood the practical reasons for not knowing anything too soon, that is, anything prior to being knowable, by recognizing that the act of looking through a camera at a painter dedicated to looking both unto and at the limits of looking can not only reward but also *heal* uncertainty over

where and what and how to look, proving certainty not so much wrong in this case as blind (or blinding). In his book *Sculpting in Time*, Andrei Tarkovsky wrote of his method for the complexly autobiographical film *Mirror* (1974) that “We made it a deliberate point of principle not to have the picture worked out and arranged in advance, before the material had been filmed. It was important to see how, under what conditions, the film could take shape, as it were, by itself.”²⁴ At first glance, this notion of letting a film take shape by itself seems rather typical of an artist’s reticence, sometimes genuinely fearful, to scrutinize the “inexplicable mysteries” or “unaccountable contingencies” of the creative process; and yet if we break that silence only the slightest bit and start to unpack (and indulge) the experience by which one thing leads to another (and, as it were, through the dark), I am confident that the conditions about which Tarkovsky speaks are still more or less none other than the conditions of film left to its own devices – devices brought to bear down, limit, and thus continually readjust or “calibrate” the creative will of the filmmaker who learns, as a result and invaluable, to be patient with his will. The filmmaker who aspires to begin the process of making a film *with* filming, even if such a method requires that he begin again by rejecting so much preparation as so much blind anticipation, has nowhere to turn except to the primary apparatus of the medium, to the mediation of the world – persons, places, things – by the camera; and upon looking through that lens, uncertain as to the eventual place and ultimate significance of this particular fragment of the world, this “time-sculpture” in Tarkovsky’s words, can see, almost as separate from the object of perception, the *path* of perception. But since the filmmaker can get no further than the threshold of that path, blocked by the camera as a

²⁴ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press Printing, 2000), p. 132.

sort of external marker of the point (virtually the tip of the nose) where human subjectivity must cease to be its own object, the prospect of catching a pure or absolute reflection of the concrete simultaneity of self and world is realized as a dream and thus stripped of its stake and replaced with the *real chance* to be contemplative with the medium of the moving image, to be precise in thought and feeling, in consciousness, through sight and sound and time and space, to become, for itself, and now in filmmaker Robert Bresson's words, a "precision instrument."²⁵

I'm glad to have hit on the writing of Robert Bresson, for at the beginning of his short (and very strict) book of notes detailing his own principles and practices of filmmaking, he declares something that sits at the heart, I think, of the entire resonant nexus of digressions constituting the aesthetic liberty (I will soon call it the autonomy) of *Dream of Light*: "The point is not to direct someone, but to direct oneself."²⁶ Such a formulation goes a long way to turn the classic stereotype of the film director on its head from someone who tells others (usually actors) what to do, to someone who must first tell himself what to do (and do it) before telling anyone anything, that is, before having the right to direct others with any authority. Telling someone else what to do before having done it, tested it, yourself, is essentially the same as telling someone to do it *for* you,

²⁵ Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, Inc., 1975). p. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.* I cannot resist appending the fact that Bresson was an experienced painter before turning to filmmaking, for it confirms an intuition I've always had about the peculiar ambivalence between hard reality and soft impression in his films (a tension I now recognize as characteristic of Erice's body of work as well, small as it is, culminating in *Dream of Light* where this ambivalence is aesthetically (physically) played out). On top of this biographical fact, I cannot resist adding the belief that the perceptual precision and internal self-direction to which he not only subscribes in writing but successfully demonstrates in his best work are, perhaps, further signs of having in spirit *remained* a painter.

ultimately as they see fit, for directions given purely as intentions lack instructions – knowledge – for how to realize them no matter how worthwhile they might seem (or sound), and so, on these grounds, are fundamentally undirected. Film directors who find themselves surrounded by a cast and crew of highly specialized professionals and technicians – craftspeople – are faced every day with the mystery of their own singular craft – what do directors *do*? – and, before long, can end up deferring or, before that, lose their authority to others better equipped to back it up, who can envision and execute what they have failed or avoided to articulate in the appropriate language (as if decisiveness were a perfect substitute for dialogue). Perhaps this is why there exists two titles for the work of creating a film, “director” and “filmmaker,” which not only have little in common but, even in their common use, might nearly cancel each other out. The best way I can think of distinguishing them on behalf of a filmmaker like Bresson, who is tireless in his efforts to distinguish the creative use of film (the *cinematography* of his book of notes) from the presence of theater in the guise of film, is by claiming that the filmmaker who directs by directing himself is really an actor who acts *behind* the camera.

Where can we begin to seek out and follow a filmmaker’s “performance”? In *Dream of Light*, at least, this idea, reminiscent perhaps of an Emersonian conception of self-reliance, manifests most strikingly in a consistent and therefore elevated attention to the detail of form (giving form to the details the more detailed it is). Such consistency in formal intensity seems at least partially indebted to Erice’s desire in this film not so much to assert himself *through* film, but rather to assert *film* as an art which inherits and no longer depends on the much older art of painting. The resolute conviction of this *sense* of consistency, I feel, is the most striking quality of the images and juxtapositions and

transitions in the film because it is what holds all these fragmentary elements within a single autonomous – I now want to say “thinking” – continuity of form, stressing as it does the time and space – the details – of the form as such: the distinct spatial continuity of discrete and discontinuous shots. The autonomy of that continuity is thus made perceptible and recognizable as cinema’s “self-reliance” through a force of consideration towards all things contingent to teleology, to tasks set by narrative convention (and no less our own expectations of those conventions and their traditions) to hold fast to a subject or character or story or genre as readymade through-lines for cinema to adopt and adhere.²⁷

For example, by filming the labor of the workers with the same degree of patience, intensity of attentiveness and distribution of emphasis across the frame as the painter’s spectacular display of craft, Erice is able to avoid raising labor to the “height” of craft or lowering craft to the “ground” of labor through a decisive acknowledgement of what reality itself makes perfectly plain regarding the similarities and differences between repairing a wall and painting a tree. Indeed there are differences, profound differences, between the two practices, but at no point during their mutual documentation are those differences found to be the sort that could justify elevating *the idea* of craft over labor, or setting up a dialectical binary between the two, as long as the passionately indiscriminate act of observing the painter’s efforts through a camera continues to document as evidence *the fact* that the possibility of inspiration, the necessity of

²⁷ I seem to be describing something fundamentally irreducible here, as if metaphysical to the film’s aesthetic, something that isn’t ever specific to a particular part of it due to a cinematic specificity of all its parts, which is why we have to look for examples *in between* the parts. Hence my insistence on *digression* as a description (of the logic) of parts “in between.” No longer contradictory, the difficulty and obscurity of the example remains, almost necessarily, and as precisely what I mean by a *whole of parts*.

communication and the potential for their convergence in the realm of artistic craft inevitably and absolutely *depend* on the power of labor, that is, on actions as recalcitrant to albeit responsible for so-called “best intentions” as any map or piece of instruction or routine habit or rhythm we might follow in our everyday lives.

What if we were to move past mere temptation and actually call this form of directorial performance a “working vehicle of knowledge”? What would that be as opposed to look like, given what any given film has to work with “to know”? A transparent subject, in our case, tracks the forever-expanding continuum of the everyday (within and between days) through the omnipresent possibility or pull of digression, facilitating the immanent flow of various and varying acts of repetition through a poetically contemplative processing of images and sounds in metaphorical or resonant relation with each other. The criteria of the everyday – what counts as the cycling and blurring of days – will appear in terms of the reclusive pressure of the multiple passages of time, not from one event to another but from one time to another: irrespectively of any consecutive and hierarchical ordering of events in of themselves. But this singling out of the autonomous workings of a cinematic continuum and then taking yet another step by endowing what seems to work *itself* out with a sort of mindful agency, points to the obscuration of the evidence of two consequences of a cinematic acknowledgement of the everyday: individuals who are invited by Erice to be as they are because they were already there as part of the environment before the arrival of camera and crew; and people in general living in a city – a city living day in and day out – sought out by crew with camera and involved unawares in their images. The difference between them seems to me to revolve around the difference between a person who is asked to be as he or she

is while conscious of being filmed, and people behind doors or in plain sight who have most likely not been asked to be filmed and in some cases were perhaps not aware of being filmed and hence are really as they are, that is, doing what they would normally be doing or not doing, without having to appear to be so, to appear natural, and as a result strangely sidestep criteria for *characters* who are the fictional or fictionalized individuals of almost any time-based narrative while, stranger still, “starring” in the shots that are definitely *about them* before being dropped by the very next cut.²⁸ In both cases, however, each shot is a view that the person(s) being viewed, aware or unaware, cannot see. That each shot is also a view that the people viewed in the other shots do not know is actually seeable adds even more weight to the separateness of the individual figures in the film. Both forms of evidence are ordinary facts of documentary film images, and perhaps of moving images in general in the context of montage, that the continuous impression of reality across images works to distort, if not deny. The medium of film as it is used (and performed) in *Dream of Light* is thus not in a position to identify with or do justice to the object(s) of a moving image (human or otherwise), rather only to the spatial relationships *between* objects and the temporal relationships *between* images; and it can get away with cutting from one image to another after a short stay with a new particular object or set of objects because it is never in the position (despite each and every digression) to cut away from the world as a whole. A moving image of the world is still the only image whose power to show a fragment *in full* actually depends upon remaining completely *contingent upon* what it must just as fully exclude. As a result, one of documentary cinema’s more

²⁸ These figures also fail to meet our criteria for *extras* who are the individuals of fictional or fictionalized groups, or of actual groups in fictional paradigms, which are liable to break if used to turn extras into characters at the expense of its own.

philosophical discoveries is that there is nothing discoverable in the world that does not enter our shared belief in “the world” as amounting to nothing less than an insurmountable, ungraspable totality; and, by extension, there is no part of it that is more worthy of belonging to an invisible whole that is the world itself than any other. Now, if we still want to say that Erice, as the invisible protagonist in his documentary on Lopez’s artistic process, begins his own artistic process, that is, his own method of interaction with the possibilities and limits of his chosen art, by digressing towards the myriad surfaces of the world-as-such after having observed and intimately aligned himself with Lopez’s staunchly realist approach, sooner or later we are going to want to attach Erice’s act of directing the medium of film away from the specific circumstances of painting *to Erice himself*, the director of a film that is finished, a film whose specific circumstances of construction are over and done with. In referring to the dramatic acts of digression by which Erice begins the film on terms set by the medium of film as opposed to those of painting (which amounts in my view to a second beginning), I do not mean to suggest that such acts transpire in the film in paradoxical separation from the film itself. The filmmaking I’m trying to account for here is describable *only* as an interpretation or reading of *Dream of Light’s* struggle, caught within the documentation of fiction, to take hold of the medium of film so as to wield it on par with the painter’s taking hold of the brush so as to reach the surface of the world or the canvas or a feeling (perhaps in a vain attempt to surpass surface altogether). But as soon as Erice starts to break free of the core subject of painting, painter and the genre of documentary which holds (obligates?) him to both, film appears to gain a more precise grounding from the “looseness” or “flexibleness” of its possibilities, and hence from its susceptibility to remote

contingencies, than any inherent conditions, for it has always been a possibility of cinema to accept and even steal new creative combinations of potential conditions in the interest of learning what it can *do* and when it might do that *again* and, pending some show of promise, make it an official part of what cinema *is*.

Any question over what something is, whose criteria for an answer is whatever makes that thing fundamentally different from everything else, is at some deeper level a fundamental questioning of its existence. The question as to what cinema is lead a theorist like Andre Bazin to an answer that seems to question the reference or the very sense of the question – that cinema, for all its examples and history, is something of a myth. His idea is that cinema, having been completely envisioned prior to its technical invention, develops in reverse towards its origins where a total representation of reality – perhaps marking the end of anything recognizable *as* cinema – awaits in Platonic store for it.²⁹ Bazin’s explanation for cinema’s lack of an essence by concluding that it has yet to be invented, yet to be logically definable, nevertheless strikes me as a definition in disguise and an accurate one at that. It is obvious enough that critics and theorists thrive, if not depend, on the ambiguity or malleability or total mystery of their objects of study;³⁰ but what is the position of those committed to the creation of those objects, working inside the object itself – inside the mystery of cinema – while fully aware that the incompleteness or absence or impurity of the object determines *all* (perhaps too much)

²⁹ Andre Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema,” in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1967), p. 17-22.

³⁰ See Part 1 in D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 1-24.

that can or even ought to be done with it?³¹ It's a question that Erice provides an answer for at the end of *Dream of Light*, in mythological terms similar to those proposed by Bazin; and perhaps it is far from an overstatement to say that the film as a whole asks the question of cinema in the light of painting, which questioned itself in light of photography's spontaneous rule of the real and brilliantly won its own rule with Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism (to name only two declarations of independence). Photography, however, and for reasons too complex to explore here, struggles to rediscover or reassert itself in response to the challenge posed by cinema, although perhaps this reveals as much or more about the nature of cinema than it does about the plight of photography: that cinema is the purity of photography *exposed* to "the ways of the world" by time and *experienced* via the most vicarious relationships with all the other arts on earth. The question before us is whether or not the success or health or generative capability of cinema depends upon whether or not it can withstand purification through subjection to the same potentially destructive questioning as painting endured in the face of photography. If the answer is yes, it must do so in the absence of a single stable essence in which to be reconstituted and a competitor or successor against which to justify such reconstitution and without which no essence could hope to awaken.³²

³¹ "We are still uncertain," writes Andrei Tarkovsky, "about the 'material' in which a film image is to be modeled, unlike the painter, who knows he will work in colours, or the writer, who knows that he will affect his readers with words. Cinema as a whole is still looking for what determines it." (173) This leads me to wonder whether or not the absence of an ontological determinant for cinema leads the curious filmmaker to a form of investigation or experimentation that is more scientific than artistic, or whose stakes are raised by the aims and ambitions of scientific inquiry as opposed to those of artistic creation.

³² The incontrovertible, here-to-stay arrival of the digital image, which D.N. Rodowick has demonstrated is more virtual than actual and hence not an image at all, can be said,

When Erice, alone in the courtyard (behind the camera) after about a month of work has been put in the painting, tilts up and away from Lopez's workspace around the quince tree to the trunk and branches and then the aging leaves of a different, immensely taller tree that neither has paid any attention to, I became overwhelmingly aware of the ease with which the beauty and complexity and raw immediacy of the tree was given a model form of representation on film. It turns out that Lopez's laboriously constraining method for creating a hyper-realistic form of representation on canvas is embodied as an absolute in every image of *Dream of Light* and, moreover, is achievable precisely due to the fact that there is simply no need for any such methodological constraints on top of what the camera already does. This ease of the movie camera to automatically and instantaneously represent reality is a truly remarkable and even surprising characteristic for an art form to possess, especially at this point in the film after so much time and energy and passion has been invested in the painterly representation of the quince tree. Through this near flick of a gesture, it seemed to me quite clear that the end to which this painter strives – representing his thoughtful perception of a living object – is precisely the point at which cinema technically begins – but to what end? If Erice can accomplish in the pushing of a button what for Lopez has cost the frustrating abandonment of not one but *two* significantly developed canvases, what is the destiny of cinema if the primary tool for constructing the primary element of the moving image is such that it already presents a finished product to the eye of the filmmaker?³³

despite what I've been saying, to pit cinema against the question over whether the art of making and viewing film is rising or falling to the occasion of the digital.

³³ There are obviously many answers (and many good answers) to the question of film's destiny as an art. The point here, rather, is to emphasize not just the importance of a filmmaker managing the question *within* his own film, but that the question was thought

The flexibility of the camera is such that it can be pointed almost anywhere, at almost anything, and for almost any length of time. But while the camera allows Erice the freedom to embrace real-life contingencies as subjects in their own right, it simultaneously bars him from directly encountering and deeply experiencing his consciousness of them and participating in a devotional intimacy with the life of a particular that Lopez claims with absolute sincerity to be the unconditional purpose (and gift) of his chosen art. (“The most important part about painting the tree is being with the tree.”) Later on, after abandoning the canvas for a drawing, and deeply involved – almost implicated – in the tree’s encroaching demise at the end of autumn, Lopez asks his friend and fellow painter Enrique Gran: “Do you know how long I’ve been here, since I started working on this tree?” The answer, according to the film’s scrupulous documentation of the passage of time, is one month and twenty-five days. In light of such a staggering investment and commitment, it’s all Erice can do, immediately after Lopez finishes asking the partially rhetorical question, to cut away from the tree and digress to yet another widespread, all-embracing montage of the city – for how could the spatio-temporal nature of the moving image and the physical nature of the camera, not to

worth dwelling upon despite the dangers of doing so; a question, as it turns out, rarely asked by film, as though filmmakers were completely convinced of its usefulness, legitimacy and fate as an art despite the fact that only a short time ago film as art was guilty until proven innocent. Erice’s doubts about the integrity of film in *Dream of Light* are perhaps also rooted in a response to the excessive and heedless confidence placed in moving images today, where the entire media nexus is innocent until proven guilty. (Erice himself has referred to the television screens pulsing their sharp blue light inside houses and apartments as “false suns,” which rise up like moons in the film when the real sun goes down.) It is up to filmmakers, I think, to provide ways, short of trembling, of helping people cope with the crisis of the image through authentic, non-didactic, patient forms of contention. For there is no way to *solve* the fact that moving images in particular are guilty of seeming innocent, nor the stranger fact, or paradox, that images of this kind are, too, all that they seem.

mention the language of narrative (especially when spoken as quickly and distractedly as the great majority of feature-length films), ever hope to sufficiently answer for the inscrutable presence of detail in the world the way painting owns up to the intensely singular existence of any and all things? A filmmaker would never gain the kind of knowledge that Cezanne earned from his studies of apples. By filming an apple, even if it becomes a lifelong obsession, one is hardly in the best creative position to work through, challenge and cleanse one's experience of it, and thus will never experience an ecstatic sense of its true "appleness." An artist like the best of them, Erice would still be fated to a relative passivity before the apple, and not just because of the camera's ability to record one without any human intervention during the act of recording, but primarily due to the likely decision to record an apple that exists – whichever one happens to be there or is chosen as a prop – instead of create a wholly different one.³⁴ That decision, assuming it is even made, cannot *pursue* the spirit and alterity of a thing. Filmmakers like photographers are dealt – even if they designed the deck – the presence of things "solved" by way of the appearances of things "sealed" (or transposed) in a recording. The machine of the camera puts the filmmaker in the awkward position of having to "break into" a form of representation that is always standing *a priori* to the will of creation and direct the world as such in line with *The Human*. It is perhaps at this point that filmmakers start to make good on cinema's ability to make use of the other arts:

³⁴ Notwithstanding (and cherishing) the feats of an Antonioni who painted the sprawling park grass a perfectly healthy green in *Blow-Up* (1966), or those of a Kurosawa who slept in bedding for a solid year before deeming it sufficiently worn to appear in the home of a 19th century country doctor in *Red Beard* (1965), or those of a Tati for a film like *Play Time* (1967) for which days were spent in a sound studio tearing pieces of paper and cloth in search of the perfect sound for when one of the waiters in the new chic restaurant – poor unfortunate soul! – rends his brand new slacks on the back of one of the most foolishly designed chairs imaginable.

animating aspects of the world into a discrete and functioning fantasy-reality by configuring a host of raw documents for the cinematic text, thereby structuring a specific *take* on reality.³⁵

I still think the scene near the end with the camera turning on by itself to film a recreation of Lopez's childhood memory marks the climax of the film's highly discreet, almost secretive meditation on its own artistic plight. Two of the tripod's three legs are shown pressed up against the same nails that Lopez used to fix his stance, but from the opposite side in place of the absent easel, thereby linking the tripod with the easel and the camera with the canvas. The camera, in contrast with the absent canvas, is pointed at the ground, though since it is night we cannot see clearly the object of its focus; and the camera, moreover, since it does not "see," won't be able to register anything at all in the faint moonlight. After a few moments a tungsten light sitting on the ground suddenly and inexplicably turns on, revealing some rotting quinces strewn about the base of the tree. These quinces are similar to the ones that Lopez, in voice over, remembers having seen as a child at the end of autumn returning to the earth beneath a strange light that seemed to him "dark yet clear" – an indescribable light that "isn't the night light, nor that of twilight, nor of the dawn." That extraordinary quality of light, much more than the rotting quinces illuminated by it, burned into his innermost being the glory of the evening sun

³⁵ Breaking into the content of an image from behind a camera needn't involve the application of structural devices and conventions. Andy Warhol's cunning and conscientious strategy of removing himself from his studio after turning on a camera to film a portrait of someone who interested him is a fascinating case where the intention to do a portrait is executed through a decisive act of self-effacement. Perhaps the idea came from the realization that people who are worth photographing hate to be stared at and immortalized, tried in honor of those who wish to remain true to themselves – and can, indeed are – but fear being thwarted if put on the spot, beneath the pressure of expectant and silent gazes, to produce something true *about* themselves.

shining a light on the face of death just before the night falls and the onset of winter. But rather than attempt to paint the mysterious memory that is the source of his inspiration for the painting, Lopez chose to paint an actual quince tree with actual autumn light in his studio backyard. What might appear as a gesture of tact based on a matter of aesthetic or even moral principle is, perhaps, little more than a simple exercising of common sense: An early but vivid memory of awakening to the inevitable night of death – in which the life prior to death's dawn is grasped as the most mature or ripe state for being to be in – transcends with ease the limits of painterly representation while reducing language to an endless list of precise negations. (*Not* the night light, *nor* that of twilight, *nor* of the dawn.)

I imagine that painters who draw from their past or unconscious learn this lesson pretty quickly when failure does irrevocable damage to the most fragile balance between having and not having a distant memory or fading dream. An old photograph of ourselves can actually confuse us with its persuasive posturing of proof that we are who we once were, even though in all truth it is only *half true* that we are still more or less behind that reminiscent face. The danger of the camera, however, is that nothing that falls within the range of its lens lies beyond its power to document it because cameras are made to represent in an image that which exists, or at least begins, independently of a maker. And since the world exists independently of anyone, it can seem to contain everything that exists, as if there were no room for anything (everything) else. The camera *maintains* this view of the world as *always already* there. Any feelings we have about someone whose picture we are taking *because* of those feelings have no way of entering the world from behind the camera to take their rightful place within the photograph, regardless of the

degree of passion in the eye . . . These sorts of claims, I realize, are quite self-evident and perhaps uninteresting, and nowhere as futile as I make them sound, but I make them again to say that it is for these reasons especially that it is easy to take pictures, and to take them one after another after another. It is so easy that even a filmmaker whose direction is at every point both meaningful, appreciable and, as I have argued, perceptible as a self-directed performance, is in no way obliged to hold, stand behind, or keep even the most remote watch over the working camera throughout this scene. By acknowledging the strange necessity of his exclusion from the automatic nature of the camera as it represents – under the cover of night – Lopez’s unrepresentable dream of light, Erice is able to suggest that the art of cinema might depend on the responsibility as much as the creativity of filmmakers to do everything in their power to supervise (as opposed to exploit) the power of cinema to inspire excess in the form of gratuitous indulgences in cinema’s own excessive “nature.” What a filmmaker does not know how to show, or knows is beyond showing, should not appear on the screen in the name of the world in which we live, for if cinema has a plight in this regard it is through it that filmmakers bear such power to fully present what has yet or always or never to be represented.

Chapter 2

*Facing the Wall of the World:
The Value of Contingency in Moving Images, or "Contingency Where It Counts"*

“Bare reality: what a crook it sometimes is. It steals things, and afterwards it has no idea what to do with them. It just seems to spread sorrow for fun. Of course, I like sorrow very much as well, it’s very valuable, very. It shapes one.”
Robert Walser, *Jakob Von Gunten*

What is it about images that move as opposed to ones that don’t that evoke not just an impression (feelings or thoughts) of contingency but project the weight of contingency – the very predicament of contingency? A photograph on a wall or screen, and especially in one’s hands, is helpless against the wrath of the viewer’s controlling and calculating gaze, helpless against being scanned as if read through and through. That is to say, a photograph is *eventually* reducible such that the thorough processing (or consumption) of what it depicts can eventually wear down the *stand* of contingency specific to representational denotation. We encounter that stand face-to-face, and know it when we see it, with the resigned exclamation “It could have been otherwise,” at which point, standing before a particular photograph, we might stress its permanency in our perception with the logical trick of a double negation: “It could not have been *not* otherwise.” Which says: the *content* of a photograph could have been otherwise, but not the photograph as a whole. The content of a moving image could also have been otherwise, but since the image as a whole does not stay and continue to stand, that can only be true in the wake of its passing. The ephemerality of moving images, then, makes their impermanence replaceable not by another image, the next image, or the screen on which they are

projected or which projects them, but by their very own continuous duration. Moving images, in this way, resist the “rape” of reason by fleeing before our very eyes and ears and minds and every which way. They take with them not just the impression of a chance event but the event of a contingent world in which events both necessary and unnecessary are possible impressions. And if where they go (once they have gone) is “into the past,” then that past can be said to coincide with the world from whence they came (be it the world itself if directly filmed or, not necessarily just as well, a world indirectly “filmed,” created from the image of the world itself and adequately overpowering to appear *a priori* to whatever appears). So these images, if they are to move *past*, must move the world or an idea of the world and therefore *like* the world, hence acknowledging the world, in order for contingency to be at stake while on display. At stake, contingency in or as the moving image would appear to demand the viewer’s acknowledgement without providing, or there being, any instructions for what to make of it nor how to make it *sign* and *signify*, and consequently there is no telling from that untraceable demand the extent to which an acknowledgment must express itself as appropriation. With the help of the evidence of moving images, which has to include the evidence of our almost instinctive and compulsive attraction to them, so with the help of our shared commitment to them as well, we must do some speculation in order to find out what an acknowledgement of their contingency as the basis and power of their evidence could consist of, lead to, and ultimately *mean*.

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When a camera records a fixed amount of the world, that portion is made to overwhelm the recording, filling it almost to the point of possessing or becoming it. Exposure of the

film (or conversion of digital code) is total, totalized in a succession of discrete frames-per-second flashes that, in succeeding one another without moving one *after* the other, exposes the thin barriers or frame lines between the photographs concealed in their movement (which is why those 24 film or 30 video photographs making 1 second of movement are called “frames” instead of what they actually are). But for all its excess of exposure, a moving image of the world onscreen obviously cannot contain what exceeds it. Instead, that part of the world *lost in the frame lines* is the world running off the edge of the frame itself (as liquid spilling off a table, paint dripping off the canvas, a leak from all sides), rendering the image a full-out trace as much as a mechanical representation of the world that overwhelmed it and which we see, or gather, in the swooning richness of a projected reality. At no point during the projection (unless there are damaged or missing frames) does this picture of reality lose, or give up, or cease, this unbearable richness. It continues, taxing its own containment like water behind a dam, but not beyond the image as though it stood in separation from the image or as if the image were altogether separate from the frame. The image, I want to say, *as the whole of its frame*, as the mechanical necessity of framing off the remaining whole of the world (and an infinity of contingency), continues the continuum of the reality represented for as long as the past is present and the present pasts.

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If it makes enough sense to say that the camera puts the user in the position to hand over the controls of creation to the world, it is as a prior datum of the camera’s implication. The tool of the camera, in other words, needn’t be involved, or yet wielded, for a filmmaker to be faced with a given foundation of the most rigidly particular givens.

Another, slightly more dramatic way of putting this is to say that the world being filmed is also in a state, or temporal flux, of “filming.” The world so filmed then does not avail itself to exposure for the sake of a camera or because there is one engaged in the process of filming it. The precise intersecting of filming and filmed is too coincidental to be so synchronous. The world, here, is what is always to be found persisting, behind one’s back should one turn around and throughout the night should one wake up, irrespectively and as such. Its perfect vigil is its immanence and is in no one’s honor.

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Although the world fills our consciousness, and surrounds our consciousness of ourselves, our consciousness *of* it founds a reality which, depending on how we shape and our shaped by it, invariably keeps us out of – and looking in at – the world that it is “of.” (I like to think we are comfortable, even complacent in our belief in a world in common worthy of being accounted for.) Our sense of reality, then, is not specifically experiential save for an experience of profound lucidity, which is to say that reality does not come in between the ‘I’ and the world so much as it holds our consciousness of the two in place (oiling the hinge or cleaning the window of consciousness, as it were) should they start to drift apart or meld together. But the human body provides a sort of practical means for opening the currents of experience to bridge reality – back and forth, to and away from the world, to and away from ourselves, for or against what we experience in either direction. The recording apparatus of the camera is fascinatingly built to take the very same approach, or make the same advance, to the world, but it can only do so dispassionately and hence indiscriminately and excessively when activated: flying us straight over the intricate paths of experience to the threshold of the world-as-such. (As a

prototype of the body without consciousness, the camera pictures the body to the consciousness behind it, or assists consciousness in positioning its body in front of itself – perhaps out of its reach or so as to begin its reach from the body instead of the mind.) To this effect, the camera does not draw the world in but nor does it hold it at bay. Its lucidity of operation – a sort of mechanical decisiveness – is a sole *means*, unflinchingly steadfast in its capacity to record the time and space of mediation governing subjects and objects as the most basic and unadorned reality. So the world that appears as a result, too, is basic and unadorned, zeroed to the ground of its presence and virtually identical with, or at least indiscernible from, a *heightened* sense of the real. A stronger way of explaining this without risking conflating “reality” and “world” would be to say that the reality in a moving image is *objective* or that the illusion of reality *respects* the experience of reality in the world.

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In moving images of the world, *that* world can strike us with the force of “will” because something *like* the world is characterized. Perhaps this characterization is fundamentally indebted to a remarkable (but no longer startling) fact of the photographic basis of the image: that the world onscreen never leaves the screen as long as the objects on the screen function to screen us from the world that they continue to belong to. The camera had the world as its one and only need, and, more importantly (and fundamentally), as that which it needs and is built to need – darkness being the only condition of the world that does not strike, or alert, the high sensitivity of film, and darkness being the absence of the world (as we know it via perception). Every frame of film is presented to the world at the same time, more or less, as burned by its light, which is the intense immaterial

property that the camera, structuring by way of a lens, receives by way of a pinhole that still cannot manage to keep the light from drowning the dark. This tiniest of holes (the aperture fixed at its narrowest setting) is by no stretch too small to obstruct the explosive surge of light from seeping. The pressure of the world held at bay, trembling behind the camera's gate, along with the speed of the individual frames running (sensing) past the opening, results in something of a measured flood, controlled just enough by the "science" of the camera. The flood, therefore, is not disastrous as long as light – assuming it is light out and light enough – is properly measured. But if the hole been much bigger, if the film had ran much slower, there would be no way for the contents of such records to be even remotely recognizable from the light required to space them in our perception. Based on these extreme and precise constraints of intake, and modeled after discoveries about how perception is built to take things in, at any given moment "the world" is all we can take of *it* – "*it*" being all that must be lost on us in order to be able to register, in confidence and in doubt, precisely what we perceive, no more no less and no other way.

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Moving images of the world can provide a response to skepticism about the world (a skepticism specifically *about* existence but that is perhaps *over* meaning) with an actual representation of the world that survives even its own absence; present enough, perhaps more than enough, is the world in its absence, and perhaps precisely *because* it is absent. Absence, here, is crucial for the rhetoric of presence, for without complete absence of object the representation would be without the power of its substance *as a trace* to

partake completely of the quality (minus the substance) of presence. Thus it is tempting to conclude that the world doesn't merely survive in a moving image but *thrives* there.

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What else makes a moving image of the world represent *as present* a world that is undoubtedly absent? Is it our presence before it and to it (with it, perhaps?) and not *in* it? Is it our satisfaction with the fact that even the appearance of presence can be doubted and still there is a world as "present" as ever, a world whose mere presence in the form or effect of a trace can overpower even *the fact* (and no mere fact) of its being absent? These paradoxes are manageable, if not resolvable, through what persists to strike me as the blind or groundless facticity of moving images – the faith of which, as it were, is that absence as such is impossible because unimaginable. The presence of absence here shows that the logical consequences of skepticism's success against the world prove to be just as unimaginable as the world's disappearance from mere represented appearance, which might mean that the endeavor of external-world skepticism harbors a secret, perhaps unconscious ideal – justifying painful sacrifices along the way – to affirm and not destroy. And so, like images that affirm *all* that they deny, it destroys to find out what is affirmable.

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The key factor, I think, that is at work in the world's absence from its own apparent presence in a moving image is the way in which cinematic representation emphasizes (I want to say promotes or advertises) the contingency of the world as such, such that no part of it need purpose, nor any necessary presence beyond *being* absent, to justify the possibility of its onscreen existence. Moving images of the world are, in a way, the only

shadows that pursue their origins full circle in an effort to be cast and possessed by them once again. In no other medium is the trace of being (the being of non-being) as self-sufficient and practical, practically self-sufficient, as it is here. In support of this idea it might even make sense to say, in basic Heideggerian terms, that the Being of the nonexistent beings onscreen is, as it were, being *used*, that its necessity with respect to the persistent grounding of things and living beings in time and space is *again* put to work – undergone – by being put on display – exhibited. That the work (or performance) of Being is exhibited “behind the glass” of a moving image lends this most essential work (the existing of what exists) the quality of an aesthetic; and it is this sense of there being an aesthetic to, or something aesthetic about, the mechanical and man-made appearance of things-in-themselves that Stanley Cavell responds to and so admires in the film *Days of Heaven* (1978) by Terrence Malick when he chooses to come to terms with its magnanimously indiscriminate and therefore crushing beauty of the natural world by linking Heidegger’s conceptualization of Being with film’s innate ontological predilection for it. After quoting a complex sequence of remarks by Heidegger (ambitiously in a foreword) on the subject (substance) of Being, beings, and man’s responsibility to think their relation in the world, he expresses the following: “If Malick has indeed found a way to transpose such [Heidegger’s] thoughts for our meditation, he can have done it only, it seems to me, by having discovered, or discovered how to acknowledge, a fundamental fact of film’s photographic basis: that objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves; they participate in the re-creation of themselves on film; they are essential in the making of their appearances.”¹ Being itself, however,

¹ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass., and London:

could have no *inherent* aesthetic of its own, no position with respect to itself that is not itself; although if we are inclined to agree with Cavell (either with what he writes about Malick and Heidegger or what he believes to be true regarding a film as truly unique as *Days of Heaven*) that Malick's acknowledgement works as an achievement, as a strategic transposition of Heideggerian ontology, the Being would certainly seem to be amenable to the point of participating with the rule of almost any aesthetic devised to approach it for itself, whether it be for the sake of Being or in the interest of aesthetics. (For instance, one could bring the idea of "silence" to bear on a *particular period* of silence, giving it the kind of meaning typically reserved for acts of speech. That here is a silence that only we can hear as *being silent* is, then, what goes without saying.)

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In a moving image of the world, the concept of Being is activated and hence justifiable non-philosophically (hence also non-conceptually). That is to say, its automatic aestheticization through the medium's immersion in the world (ideally with but potentially without the help of photographic transcription) constitutes the ground of its own *screened* justification, going without saying more often than not if went without anyone noticing. Now, generally speaking, with respect to aesthetic appropriations of moving images, whatever concepts and hermeneutics are deployed as principles of organization, or form, would seem to flit about the surface of *being qua being*, unable to (justifiably) penetrate the auratic singularity of objects participating in the re-creation of their own appearances. In order, for an object to occupy a specific place within an order of significance in a film and function as one of its grammatical elements of expression, it

would have to appear more than once (the same object across different or repeated contexts or appearances) or more than the object itself requires to appear “as it is” (which might always be the case if we believe its appearance to depend on the context of its appearance). The idea *behind* the explicit repetition or “excessing” of an object lifts it, without necessarily succeeding to pry it, from the clutches of contingency – the constant but “contentless” work of Being – so that it can stand for the time being on a privileged plane of reference and perform its imaginary function.

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There is a sense in which every thing *belongs* in a moving image of the world. The internal juxtapositions between one thing and another are so effortlessly, so smoothly incongruous that they are almost completely leveled. This cinematic landscape, within and across images, is an ontologically “democratic” one, which means that any thing, any moment, at any time and anywhere, can potentially become the focus of various attentions (a film character’s or the filmmaker’s or a film viewer’s) and move from *not* having a purpose in the background or outskirts to *now* having a significant purpose in the foreground. But when now becomes then and the present slips away out of view to be replaced, nothing really changes within this new “now” except the view, or rather nothing except the view of reality turns out to have an effect on reality. And yet the filming of the world cannot be said to “write” on the world, through it nor with it. If it could have either one of these functions, having any of these effects, it could not make into an image the reproduction of the world as it was when it was filmed. Moving images, then, are the closest representation has come to literalizing a mediated transposition of the world. The

world so transposed is perhaps overly involved, with a deterministic influence upon the forms of its reciprocation by way of a camera.

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The camera's implication in the world it films calls for a deference of will to the prior existence of the world (the ease of which is the responsibility of the filmmaker to interject). But does this mean that the filmmaker has no exact determinable *say* with respect to the device he or she has chosen to speak with? Not exactly. The filmmaker can speak by choosing, let us say, the moment of speechlessness as a response to his peculiar powerlessness (assuming he has managed to take power over the process of filming), choosing not just the moment but the means by which he exchanges his will for that of the world's and starts shooting. For it is the world – where human beings work out (or don't) their purposes – that can accept and sometimes abide but never fully absorb or take on an act of will. If it could, we would have no sense of the world as separate from, and hence a reference point for and possibility of, our sense of reality: a dichotomy so sharply defined as when two realities intersect in the world.

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The desire to attribute “will” to the world begins in radical exclamation to the inexplicable or paradoxical obtrusiveness of contingency, to its boldly demanding negation of necessity and impossibility that Niklas Luhmann describes as conceptually problematic insofar as “the two negations cannot be reduced to a single negation.”² But the exclamation, however hysterical, has logical substance at its source, and is in direct

² Niklas Luhmann, “Contingency as Modern Society’s Defining Attribute,” in *Observations on Modernity*, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 45.

reference, I think, to the possibility *of* will, the condemnation *to* the will, and the immanent interactions and collisions *between* willing agents. The world does not, obviously, have a will of its own, but when a particular event occurs in the world it comes to pass in spite of its lack of objective necessity, which essentially means that what is meaningful for the agent(s) behind that event, coming to pass in a meaningful way for those out in front, is potentially meaningless – contingent – to the agents surrounding it or nowhere near it or perhaps indifferent to it. Acts of will break off from the will as an event is put into motion, and, after gaining enough speed as it were to sustain itself, stands in spite of the forces that in acting upon it (reciprocating, opposing, participating) can never succeed to act upon it directly, upon the world now (so the deductive leap goes) as the total crystallization of action. The weight of the world as a whole is felt to weigh down or add “world-weight” to the event because the event has become something of a social microcosm. Emerging solid from the forces that constitute it, the world can appear to “supervise” the relations between its subjects and objects or “facilitate” stability through the facility of the one characteristic that is in fact the world’s to “will”: *immanence*, a concept waiting in the wings.

*

A medium that directly implicates the external world, using it as the basis for it, is an *open* medium. The camera, by itself, unleashes successive framings of perspective upon the world after the fact of the world’s existence, thus obstructing the injection of concrete intention into the concrete elements stationed before it. Technologically, at least, the medium of film comes “unprepared,” albeit quite focused, to the extent that the camera takes its beginning – starting over with the materiality of time and space – in light of an

observation. To begin from within *the hold of a response*, regardless of how predetermined the object of the response, is to invite the element of contingency into the interior of the representation. The precedence of the object mingles or interferes with the meaning or function that has been ascribed to it and which justifies it in the image, keeping the formation of significance in a state of indeterminacy or exploration.

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Despite the fact that cameras promise the preservation of what is captured, what is preserved in an image can never absolutely take the form of what was intended to be preserved because the nature of the camera is such that it beats the filmmaker to the punch of creation, so to speak, always having an image, as it were, “in mind.”

Filmmakers who recognize this fact are in all likelihood not purposive, goal-oriented storytellers who force images, first and foremost, into fulfilling precise narrative functions. Rather, in relinquishing a mastery of rational intentionalism for a spontaneous responsiveness enabled by the automatic nature of the camera, the ambiguity and unpredictability of the present tense within the reality of the film can be deliberately and strategically unleashed. But if a moving image of the world is the result, fundamentally, of a response, then how would one go about determining, from our point of view, which images function in narrative film as invitations for the disturbance and/or multiplication of meaning? Why, for example, are the films of Terrence Malick or Robert Bresson or Michelangelo Antonioni more prone to the “lure and threat of contingency”³ than other directors and even something more or less undirected like a surveillance video, and why, more importantly, can it be true of only certain images, or moments, from their films?

³ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 11.

Perhaps because in a medium that lends itself to showing the visible at the expense of the invisible they are filmmakers who very often succeed in placing sound above sight in the hierarchy of response, and who see the hearing in seeing, which requires that the realization of imagery begin by first intuiting their form (drawing them out in the sense of luring a threat) before figuring their semantic worth within the currency of the whole. These unassimilated facts of the film world, facts that precede a purpose or whose purpose is the very lack of an obvious teleological or thematic one (excluding the false-importance trickery of narrative decoys like the red herring), have a peculiarly aural quality about them.

*

The argument that moving image contingency hinges on the *facts* of photographic indexicality (that the filming of objects leaves a trace on film that, when projected, directly refers to those objects in their absence) is seriously undermined by the possibilities inherent in the frequently underprivileged aural dimension of a film. Whether sound is recorded by a microphone built into the camera itself, or from an external source, or during post-production and laid in long after the fact, sound is the primary means by which a filmmaker can evoke the porous membrane of the pictorial frame and delineate aspects of the surrounding, merely invisible world (incoming or receding away or lingering static) that the camera is in no position to reach (even if it could infinitely extend beyond what it shows). The frame might be said to “refer” to the ongoing world by functioning as a “brake”⁴ against the indiscriminate free-flow of space, but it is sound that shows how – and a little bit of where – the world does in fact go on

⁴ Only one of Doane’s many evocative metaphors for cinema’s rationalization of a contingency it helps justify. *Ibid.*, p.22.

(until those facts run out and endlessness is intimated). Good hearing is pure receptivity, and close attention to the dimension of sound (as a filmmaker or viewer or critic) paves a way for the invisible to enter the visible and alter the course of a shot, scene or even the entire film.

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Contingency is an inextricable factor in the process of recording images creatively and for creative use. This aspect of contingency, however, is of a fundamental or elementary type, and is not specific to signs of the deliberate aesthetic use of contingency (as in the case of Malick's methods for *Days of Heaven*), but rather to the possibility of it taking over the filming process and winning the will of the filmmaker(s) *at any moment*, drastically changing some perhaps very made-up minds. This possibility is also tied to and tantamount with the possibility that *any* moment from a film can seem contingent, more found than made, or made by way of first having found. The idea of making contingency "from scratch" by ceding strategically to chaos is another matter entirely. It seems to me that the only way of making contingency aesthetically legible, significant and interesting is to go against contingency despite it. Going in headfirst, sidestepping intention altogether and becoming skeptical towards the fixation of meaning, is the surest way of waiting for – and getting – nothing, or of misrepresenting nothingness by filling it with mere conceit. Chaos, meaninglessness, nothingness, pure existence or bare life – whatever you want to call it – are nothing, are insubstantial and unnoticeable, without their opposites – *their* contingencies – working full force.

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Sensing contingency as a viewer might depend more on a fact that is disconnected from, although hardly unrelated to, the ontology of moving images: whether or not their making occurred in the world, in actuality, as opposed to outside the world, virtually, or nowhere *in particular*. While the total synthetic creation of a world on computers is by no means immune or inhospitable to the influence and incorporation of contingencies to characterize the world of the film as “world-like” (over and above the trajectories of a narrative), I feel it is fair to say that the possibility of creating a contingent moment or event authentically, as though it were not created and just happened to occur (which may or may not have been the case), is somewhat contradictory without the existence of a contingent world (fit, of course, with the proper historical paradigms) in which lives are “thrown” without destinies writ large and whose seemingly causal connections within and between events appear contingent (to the camera or at first glance). It is improbable that a purely synthetic image will be able to afford an experience of contingency and through no fault of its own ontology, for it would have been equally improbable for the virtual epistemology of digital mediums (or automatisms⁵) to have afforded the maker(s) with the sorts of encounters with contingency unique and abundant in the world (and especially in *this* world). The shooting stage of filmmaking, where a film’s images and sounds get constructed and collected for post-production refinements and manipulations, has the defining characteristic of depending upon an instrument like a camera whose usage depends entirely on things external to it. With the camera functioning as a kind of bridge or conduit between a “behind” and an “in front,” the creation involved in the act of

⁵ This term, extrapolated from surrealism, is used by Cavell in *The World Viewed* to refer to the working possibilities of an art form, discovered by artists and then as if donated to the medium that they discovered it with, and discovered *again* each time they are put to significant use.

recording shots or scenes not only occurs within a state of being-in-the-world but also stages that very state. The act of filming operates within these conditions of existence underlying and exceeding any and all forms of expression in the form of a contingent ground or a ground contingent to them. A virtual mode of imaging does away with the automatism of being-in-the-world and replaces it with a being-out-of-the-world, a relationship to the world that appears to place one's being *above* the world, above and beyond a concern for and service to the being of the world as such, by placing one in front of a screen that falsely demarcates a "new world" where mastery over existence – creating the power for what will exist to exist – is pursued as a final frontier. In response to D.N. Rodowick's claim that "[There] is no ontological difference between the information captured by charge-coupled devices [i.e. digital video cameras] and information constructed on a computer in ignorance of an originating state of affairs,"⁶ there is no doubt a significant epistemological difference between working with a medium that takes its user into the midst of the world and one that requires its user to completely simulate a world – a world that exists only insofar as it is made and is made only to the extent that it fulfills certain logical criteria for existence. That is why simulated worlds usually contain a lot of "world," so to speak, because of the paradox of creating the existence that prevails even when there is nothing.⁷

⁶ D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 123.

⁷ *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) is the best example of a virtual film that falls into the trap of creating a world by filling the screen to the brim with details, confusing what makes a world exist with how much of that world can be shown. But since there is no way to create the *existence* of even one thing, for the simple reason that it will not exist for real, it is common for filmmakers to try and compensate for this by creating the existence of many things one way, operating under the fallacy (and in Cameron's case the fantasy) that in order to make a world cohere one must make it coherently unified, one,

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Photographic indexicality is only justifiable as the primary criterion for moving image contingency if it is activated as an automatism (i.e. through stasis or deep-focus or excessive duration), figuring into the experience of a viewer who ascribes to the image the power of the objects he or she believes to have been brought back, more or less as they were. It is possible, therefore, to have an experience of contingency without the index, but not without an experience of indexicality or “indexicalness,” as it were. Such an experience, I want to say, depends more on the degree in which the *claim* of indexicality is made through a qualitative approach to objects, with the consequent facilitation and perhaps even prioritization of contingency (first by the filmmaker and then by the viewer). In this theoretical case, and perhaps in every *actual* case, automatism will override ontology. (This is in keeping with, and no less indebted to, one of the major underlying threads of Cavell’s *The World Viewed*: reflections on the ontology of film become reflections on automatisms primed by what must be, or become, an evolving ontology.)

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Mary Ann Doane states in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* that “contingency introduces the element of life and the concrete, but *too much* contingency threatens the crucial representational concept of totality, wholeness. . . The present moment, contingency, and temporality as indeterminate are hazardous to sense.”⁸ She goes on to suggest that the narrative structures that took hold shortly after cinema’s technological

not just geologically but politically, with no exceptions to the rule (i.e. manifesto) of its oneness, making it incoherently non-contingent in all respects.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12. (Doan’s italics)

advent can be seen as the attempt to rationalize the representational excess of contingency.⁹ The codes and conventions designed, in effect, to steer contingency into a teleological trajectory enforce the same kind of control on the intractable and indeterminable nature of natural and social reality as statistics does, while resisting the suppression of the elements of chance that do arise as inevitable or “fair” deviations. It is the work of narrative, in part, to counter and smooth out the latent effusions and manifest aberrations of contingency while keeping an eye on the generative unpredictability of contingency to deliver the vitality of the variation, of the new, so as to unlock the potentiality of the instant. Statistics and narrative – statistics as the narrative of chance and narrative as somewhat statistical in function – presume that there is no such thing as an objective epistemological pursuit because there is no way of creating knowledge without an audience for whom it can *count*, and hence no possibility of procuring anything resembling general knowledge. The resolutions and explanations that are forced out of contingency are lost as absolute truth if gained at the *expense* of contingency. But statistics and narrative walk a fine line; and cases where contingency is beyond integration but a factor nevertheless testify, I gather, to what Doane refers to with appropriate humor as the “embarrassment”¹⁰ of contingency.

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⁹ For a full appreciation of the complex layering and elegant pace of her historical argument, I refer the reader to the fifth and sixth chapters of the book, including their prefacing or staging at the end of the fourth chapter, which contains a brief analysis of the surprising affinities (as opposed to the over-emphasized and convenient binaries) between the “realist” films of the Lumière brothers and the “fantastic” forms of Georges Méliès as turn-of-the-century technicians of the contingent. Classical narrative form, she concludes, would be a repudiation of *both* deviations and their respective deviants, almost in one fell swoop.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Moving image contingency is obviously not conceptually commensurate with contingency itself, but that needn't be the case to proceed with an investigation of the latter through the former. And since consciousness of the latter may be fundamentally inscrutable by virtue of being too close to consciousness itself, the former, on its own, and without the help of teleological structures of meaning, provides that basic rationalization so crucial, in this case, to the *expression* as opposed to the organization and harnessing of contingency. If it is more accurate to say that moving images express instead of embody contingency, or appear to embody it only when expressed and experienced on some level by makers and viewers, then it is the "affective temperament" as opposed to the "lurking ontology" of contingency – what I will want to call, paradoxically, an *anthropomorphism* of contingency – that I am responsible for taking as my cue in the attempt to access the spirit of contingency "itself" (which I deem valuable – "spirited" – *for-itself*, in a manner and for reasons which will become clearer later on). The moving image, I think, is an effective cue here because it moves in time and space and as – as a comprehensive image of – time and space. Moving images (again, specifically of or about the world), in bearing the qualities of time and space, and as representations that withstand their own ambition of totalization, characterize or dramatize contingency by characterizing or dramatizing the world onscreen into something that *seems* necessary, governed by the mechanical and immutable laws of its onscreen replication. The degree to which Aristotle's early albeit enduring definition of contingency proper holds for moving images, expressive or not of contingency, is striking: "It can occur, that once it exists, given that it is not necessary, there will be no

potential in it not to be.”¹¹ What a moving image represents is no less unnecessary, with no less potential not to have been, than anything we might call contingent; but the fact that it is preserved as a fact before one’s eyes (and only one’s eyes, hence only on the surface) has the effect of factualizing what could have been otherwise, reinforcing and perhaps even aestheticising the lack of potential to be other than it is by being or seeming to be what it *was*.

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I accept that the experience of contingency can be a historical issue before a representational or epistemological or existential one (determined by historical shifts no less contingent than contingency itself), but only on the condition that I am free to accept, despite whatever contradictions, that the portrayal and propagation of contingency in moving images solidifies contingency, bringing contingency to its very limit, contradicting it (theoretically) with an appearance of profound necessity. The cinema, then, not to mention the entire virtual spread and saturation of moving images which follow and extend it, is not just another cultural “symptom” of its own historical context; but, as the artistic medium *par excellence*, the one that relinquished its control over space by accepting the autonomous onslaught of time, the first one to liberate the ontological synchronicity of time and space in aesthetics, it is the one that stares its own death – its own inherent and pregnant impurity as an art form – in the face. In doing so, it naturalizes the intricately complex weave of historical contingency in an ontological way by picturing the world (the scene of history) as unaffectedly deprived (ontologically

¹¹ Aristotle, *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes, vol. 1: The Categories, On Interpretation, and Prior Analytics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 32.

deprived) of ontological constants, striking a new restlessly finite or “contingent ontology” with every picturing.

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Moving images prioritize existence over meaning with respect to their contents. But that is to say: the existence of the possibility of meaning is itself meaningful, that meaning can exist in the form of existence, simultaneously present and absent. If one happens to be struck by something contingent, something seemingly without decisive meaning, something relatively ambiguous or neutral, then the very possibility of meaning or purpose or value in the first place is so strikingly tangible, so actual and immanent, so obviously meaningful by virtue of being what it is as a first and fundamental priority before becoming anything else.

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Tracing our sense of cinematic contingency will necessarily take us beyond the recorded or composited or synthetically constructed content of a moving image to its circumstance as an observation, a circumstance that might be more precisely characterized as “the factual dimension of the medium of meaning.”¹² This path, however, will not or should not lead us to rest anywhere near an ontology of the moving image as the locus of contingency. Instead, this factual dimension of the medium of meaning puts us directly in front of the sort of image that seems at any given instant of its duration to be directly in front of – and so close to being at one with – the world itself. Such an image appears to “want” to lead us back to the cause of its contingency in the rawness of the world, but all the while an equally significant cause operates out in front, in between it and a viewer,

¹² Ibid., p. 48.

where an observation is itself observed. I wish to call this phenomenon whereby a viewer is conscious of observing an observation to the point of observing a representation of observation the *backwards* or *mirror ontology* of moving image contingency.

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The obviousness of the world's parts is part of what the world as a whole is, or what we mean in referring to it as one. But in living the world we tend to lose sight of the fact that no amount or depth of experience can ever lift the surfaces that inspire us into deepest pursuit. A moving image, in holding the surface of the world at an impassable and hence permanent distance, can succeed, nevertheless, in holding our attention, reminding us, perhaps, and in the midst of our absorption, how little we attend to the world in our own lives, to the world and nothing more – an attentiveness that would be the sole measure, day by day, of our intimate process through it. The closest point to the screen, therefore, is hardly the place from which to be *in touch* with what it shows. The same lesson time and again: the closer one tries to get to the world in an image the closer one comes to an image of the world – to an image and nothing more.

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It is important to remember that the effect of reality in a moving image is an assertion of the medium for chemical or technical as much as for conventional reasons. Beneath the appearance of something definite and immaculately recognizable there are no things-in-themselves to ground a particular experience of the real. As a result, the world onscreen cannot be said to exist in the consciousness of a depicted person or film character no matter how much it may appear to be the case, for without the world itself there is no “ontological material” through which to be conscious or towards which to be

unconscious. Since an automatic transposition of the world is always already an image of it, an image with a clear phenomenological as opposed to a metaphysical ontology, it cannot assume the form of any other reality except the reality of the world in its absence. This is no longer the same world that we look out at, that we see on the other side of us, the other half of perception. For this reason it is not a questionable mind-independent world but a *hypothetical* one; it would make no sense, for example, to deny it to the figures and characters appearing there (and on the same grounds that it would make sense to deny the *actual* residence – what about the *actual* appearance? – of figures or characters in films and film worlds).

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The human beings found existing within their respective lives onscreen – carrying out their screen lives in the guise of their characters – are to some significant extent commensurate with the people – the moving breathing bodies – who undoubtedly lack this very existence, that is, the conditions necessary for their existence to be on par with how it appears in moving images of themselves. Screen characters, we “know,” are the embodied lives of the people brought back to us, delivered as they are, so seamlessly, that they can continue *to be as they were* when they were filmed. It is through them that the past, like a ghost, is summoned back into the present as perhaps the most curiously transgressive and grotesque aspect of the medium. The exclamation “There is Falconetti’s face!”, said while staring at the real woman’s tears in *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (1928), would not twitch at the tip of my tongue or go so far as to part from my lips as readily as, say, “Falconetti’s face is there,” as in “over *there*” – which actually turns out to be more of a comment than an exclamation. That her face has accompanied its appropriation into

the moving image without having altogether survived it, which would be to surpass it, is exactly the kind of paradox that reminds me just how obvious, blunt, and easy to overlook even the most indissoluble paradox can be.

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Screen characters who aspire to deny the world to themselves, or who refuse to recognize the world as separate from themselves, thus denying themselves to the world, are uncommon, for they are up against the obstinate evidence of the world's paradoxical presence in moving images. With respect to the dispositions of nihilism and solipsism, moving images of the world reveal that the influence of thought in the formation and fixation of a retaliatory perspective on the world is specific to the thinker whose thinking clouds instead of clears his or her view of the world. For the rabid nihilist, the world, although rejected, does not withdraw. For the passionate solipsist, lost to the world as if left behind, had never been able to break with it in the first place. Neither one made a dent in their enemy. The world, according to but a few verifications from the existence of others in not dissimilar relations to it, does not reinforce or reciprocate (I want to say indulge) the peculiar maladies of narcissistic impulse so degrading to one's intellectual conscience. But the mind contracts illnesses – drifts out of step or out of synch with respect to the minds of others – just as the body does. Moods descend unannounced and stick to us as obstinately and impeccably as our shadows. Sometimes a good night's sleep is enough to shake off the awkward imbalance, although oftentimes it is nowhere near, and just as often backfires by slotting yet another brick in the wall. As long as one's consciousness of the world remains partly clouded by self-consciousness, the less the world can shine through it, the more it will shrink and dim in proportion to the growth

and brightening of the self *to* itself. If only we could see with sharper clarity how mistaken we are in thinking that we can actually see through and past ourselves to the world, so far beyond our clouds. Seeing such a sight as us, we could see ourselves from outside ourselves trapped as the self, trapped inside the body's animation of the 'I'. In the space of a moving image where we can see ourselves projected, the self appears to have an "outer edge" or wear a "hard shell" as it delineates inwardness and on certain occasions punctuates psychosis, bearing the look of solitude or harboring the stuff of privacy or wielding the enigma of madness. Although such an image never succeeds in getting behind a face entirely, its derailment at the threshold of interiority – somewhere in the realm of the close-up – results in nothing short of a detailed, visualized inference of the view of the intensely singular angle (or point) of another mind. Unable to probe the depths of consciousness, and yet so certain that a person's innerness begins with their expression, the hard evidence of even the most absent look has the power to charge the neutrality of its surroundings into surroundings *all its own*. The face, it turns out, no longer stands out in separation from the head. (I'm thinking of the final close-up of Anthony Perkins in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).) The entire head – fortified siege of skull – is now the face; and the "seeping" of the mind onto the world surrounding it, or the "folding" of the mind upon the world inside of it, touches not those or any surrounds but rather the senses, the permeable surrounds of the self through which consciousness flows, all in keeping with Béla Balász's "microphysiognomy of the soul."¹³ At least this is what can be inferred from the indistinguishable nature of environments surrounding a human subject from those which look from the point-of-view of a subject or, in the absence of a

¹³ Béla Balász, "The Face of Man," in *Film Theory and Criticism* (fifth edition), ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 309.

subject, are their own subjects. Each case survives equally well the powers and problems of first, third and point-of-view perspectives, be it outside looking in or inside looking out or just looking.

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The persistence of the world in moving images is therefore *backgrounded*. Often it becomes blurred there when the focus is put on the persistence of a perspective – a perceiver perceiving – as opposed to the perception. The sharp contours of the head, most apparent in the close-up, reference the clarity of distortion that is further emphasized through the containment of a countenance. The camera can only come up to it as close as the physiognomic point where it appears at once to begin and end its remove from the world, across the hinge to and from privacy. The stress, however, of deep introspection, its estrangement and mounting danger in the close-up (again Perkins' face at the end of *Psycho* comes forcefully to mind), supports the suspicion of there being no authentic or chartable place to inhabit outside of one's "place" – the self's concrete materialization of the body's separateness – respectively (respectfully) to the places of others. This is one way, it seems to me, in which we are shown to have, to the extent of being visibly had by – bound by – a body.

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In his "More of *The World Viewed*," Cavell claims that "the myth of film is that nature survives our treatment of it and its loss of enchantment for us, and that community remains possible even when the authority of society is denied us."¹⁴ This myth runs counter to the hermeneutic drift of conventional myth, which uses (and abuses)

¹⁴ Stanley Cavell, "More of *The World Viewed*," in *The World Viewed*, enlarged edition, p. 214.

semiological operations in the naturalization of history. The myth of film as told by Cavell seems less a type of speech as defined by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies*,¹⁵ for its language (if it indeed can be called one) is more closely aligned in breadth and bearing to a basis for speech itself: the involvement of metaphysical attributes in the naturalization of history, or history put at the mercy of the metaphysical. That nature has survived the entire history of attempts to naturalize history suggests that nature had barely even had to survive them, that it had never been our true collective subject, never once put on the stand regarding our ideas and judgments about what should and shouldn't have significance for us; and that it is humanity alone, one community to another, which resides in the realm of its own linguistic projections – valuing and evaluating the various conceptual schemas and trajectories by which the present continues the past into the future. But if nature's survival is believed to have been “oblivious” to ours, if it is thought “indifferent” to its disenchantment and hence to our survival on terms of our own making, then the possibilities of human survival (i.e. changing the criteria by which survival is achieved) can become quickly relegated to utopian ideals like “community” or “nation” or “historical destiny,” which all seem to point towards something off in the distance, to settling a future where something deeper and more lasting than nature is pictured as enchanted for the first time: Time itself. That real lasting present-specific change might require a change to the effect of the enchantment of time, begs the immediate, almost logistical and perhaps unanswerable question of whether or not the present can serve as an accessible point of intervention upon the time of history, with a wide enough entry onto the space of time itself or of time passing, or if it is even new –

¹⁵ See the section “Myth Today” in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 109-159.

present – enough or just the resonance of the past forcing itself through the one way street of time.

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One thing that cinema in particular seems to have shown over time is that nature or the world is never remade or unmade by what we make of it, that what we make of it epistemologically is actually only what we make of ourselves metaphysically.

Throughout its short but congested and manifold history, the same external world is cast again and again as a kind of ontological backdrop, regardless of what a particular film's discourse concludes is different about it – even temporally different about it – by the end. While a film's characters can undergo change, film itself reminds us that history (the discourse of change) goes on despite change, perhaps as the very continuum and constant of change itself.

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Contingencies onscreen can occur with the same force as contingencies in the world through a common reaction which, when phrased as a response, goes by the name “accident.” They are given this name at the moment when they cannot be made to fit – and just as often when they sweep by unfitted – to a world-view premised on covering the world as a whole. I can think of seven characteristics (or “temperaments” as has been my preference, but characteristics nonetheless) of contingency that constitute the force to proceed uninterrupted and stand up to the world we maintain in our everyday views of it by thwarting our attempts to categorize what is contingent upon those views: spontaneity, ephemerality, neutrality, opacity, bareness, conspicuousness, and deceptive or non-indifferent unimportance.

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The shapelessness of time, or one too many shapes for it, hence a scattered abundance of unregulated crossroads, renders contingency into something of an element out of which the world seems built, or better yet a principle upon which the world seems organized. Positive, concrete meaninglessness, as it were, is thus everywhere bountiful and growing and *potentially* meaningful. The *content* of this bare life, everything now *contingent to* one's own life, is, however, *too* overfull and pressing to be freshly or insightfully or even practically reducible. Meaning made for the sake of substituting the "materiality" of the meaningless, made in the spirit of subversion or privation, tries to make room for something to be found missing (amiss) in this burgeoning diversification and stratification of dormant content – one that must by its very definition include everything and more, everything on the verge of becoming new but remaining old unless encountered on that verge – making the case that extreme potentiality is as good as extreme poverty. To dismiss as an accident a brush with indeterminate plenitude accuses potentiality of ambiguity, and then goes on to accuse ambiguity for being inadequate to any working criteria for certainty. The "search for meaning" in a time where contingency is as much a reality (that is, concrete) as the concept of it, is such that whatever meaning is claimed to be discovered is likely not to be credited to the type of search that created it, or that created the conditions for discovering it, so that what appears (cuts) abruptly (contingently) and without warning along the way of the method, perhaps right in the midst of what is being selectively sought to then show up conveniently found, threatens to distress, diverge and perhaps altogether reorient a methodological or existential course through life into the chaotic panorama of a tailspin of pure potentiality – and into the life

of any course whatsoever. With respect to a commitment to facilitate or lubricate the process of making meaning at whatever cost, instants of contingency (call them *aporias*) by the same token can also be the most supplely indiscriminate materials to do so in a material way, assuming one can find grounds for discriminating between one instant and another, thus holding off a chain reaction or downward spiral *into* contingency. And the search for meaning (as opposed to a meaningful search) takes all the help it presumes to have received.

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C.S. Peirce says of *chance* that it is of all things the most obtrusive and manifestly absolute in our intellectual perceptions.¹⁶ Along with being the most “decisive” characteristics of the indeterminable, obtrusiveness and absoluteness are also the most seemingly contradictory to that which lacks necessity, for necessity would seem to obtrude the most upon our absolute freedom or the will. However, chance encounters or *aporias* of contingency, upon closer inspection, can be accurately interpreted as circular expansions or “butterfly-effects” of linear courses of will, especially and most profoundly within the single opposition of a competing or counter-course. They can also be accounted for as concrete or crude contradictions to the extent that they do not signify differently or logically or rhetorically or with any recognizable measure of intention and hence not yet at all: profusely realized, thoroughly extended, and fundamentally resistant to a full-out rejection. I said before, however, that when considered with a view to their source they become, as a whole, the manifest force (call it the crest) of another act of will that can no longer be traced back to its original agent. Lost in the labyrinth of historical

¹⁶ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 6: *Scientific Metaphysics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 425.

and material contingency, that original act of will (unbeknownst to the agent who originated it) is hopelessly untraceable, having “snowballed” as it were into a concentrated and random realization of various combinations of cause and effect that, at its most obtrusive and manifestly absolute, has entered its final phase of resonance before dissipating. These material resonances of will – these palimpsests of will – have the power as pure potential to trigger a single working will without necessarily opposing it. So the dutiful acknowledgement of a contingent factor or live aporia would do very little to motivate the will, not to mention reorient its method of encounter – and means of decisiveness – from thoughts to things. By and large, we cannot seem to break out of this stance of vacant reflection and meet existence face-to-face – participating with contingency – until something obtrusively and absolutely significant (non-contingent) is perceived as punctuating the banal, stirring repetition; but should that (by chance?) occur, our attention will have been so abruptly piqued that we might not know (in time) if it will be the response or the reaction of the will to open or close, receive or protect, elasticize or flatten, consciousness. The crux of the matter, as I see it, does not hinge on whether or not consciousness is the impoverishment of the will, but whether or not the way it represents the will in our own experience is representative of the will’s power to engage consciousness *in* experience, that is, experientially; and, depending on the verdict, if it actually makes sense, from the point of view of consciousness, to be able to will our experiences – empowering experience – without necessarily being able to have or grasp the experience of having done so.

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To be in awe of an experience is to have nothing to offer the experience one is in awe of, except perhaps to send it into explanation by withdrawing it into consciousness. The last resort attempt to hold in one's hands what one has undergone gradually becomes knowledge the means of which cannot simultaneously be held and hence were excluded in the knowing. But means can't be held *period* because means never actually take hold of their ends, which is probably one of the reasons why knowledge is held onto so tightly and at the expense of its means. The feeling, then, of missing the means to a particular end – and in general missing the knowledge to become a reliable means to knowledge – betrays having been in the clutches of an experience that one could not join hands with however hard one tried and without making matters worse by counting off the degrees of separation. (These hands seem tied behind the back of sturdiest reflection, tongue-tied as it were by the body's appeal to the sterile touch of cognition.) The impression that our strongest experiences are like objects dangling just beyond the span of our reach, that they are inevitably and therefore fittingly unreachable with respect to an enigmatic sense of outright otherness, hits with the blunt force of a conclusion. The awed subject is rendered passive not *before* the object it knows to the extent that it owns it, but rather *as a subject* ignorant or uncertain or perhaps altogether unqualified to approach such an experience immanently from within as opposed to possessively from outside the span of its reach to communicate it to itself. The experience as a whole thus faces the fate of complete and utter wordlessness before even a single word is tried on for size. Worse than the fear of finding words that are a bad fit is the temptation to leave the whole thing naked, that is, more or less behind as one found it. Unsure about the place and purpose of our involvement in the experience that overwhelms us; confused perhaps about whether

or not this world, so cryptically revealed in its manifestations, is compatible with our consciousness of it; and skeptical, perhaps fearful, that the use of experience as a form of mediation and imagination between thought and perception will entail a loss of consciousness altogether: these are some of the bases of fear itself in the face of what faces us. (But in the event that consciousness at last subsides in awe, what, *I* wonder, would be left of ourselves to respond with? Would there even be a response to speak of, or in the very least a movement towards one? Or rather only a sense of relief with the world's presence so suddenly full bringing the temporary suspension of the need to search for some way to fill it?)

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I don't think there is much doubt that passivity is peculiar to the whole of film: the automatism that is the condition for the making of moving images of the world is reflected in the condition for viewing the world *already* viewed. This is the peculiar condition of animate passivity that Gilles Deleuze in *The Time-Image* uses to characterize the viewer as something of a "spiritual automaton."¹⁷ I wish to speak of passivity in a sense that is similarly peculiar, the sense of it having a sense, a state, with its own specific message of reply. The passivity of filming and the passivity of viewing what has been filmed have already been described as sharing an implicitly decisive deference to the world's perpetual "readiness" to survive and succeed (as if unfazed) whatever discriminations and manipulations and extrapolations projected upon it (as if against a wall). "I relate that idea," writes Cavell, "most immediately to my passiveness before the exhibition of the world, to the fascination, the uncanniness, in this chance to view the

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 156.

manifestation of the world as a whole.”¹⁸ For makers and viewers alike, depending of course on their positions and preferences, the state of passivity when operant, perhaps even when passionate, becomes the basis of a deep fascination with a world that is not only there to behold but also to be helplessly (uncannily) in the hold of, as if equally locked behind the glass of an exhibit. This world as a whole, perceived from the perspective of passivity, is the one that holds for everybody, manifesting distinctly in each subjectivity as the one we all recognize to exist *despite* subjectivity, and to which we therefore invariably turn in an effort to become recognizable to each other and, perhaps, to *belong* to each other. This act of outwardly turning towards the exhibition of the world as a way of turning towards others, that is, others facing the same way, at the screen as opposed to the face, seems to be at its most intuitive with respect to the experience of movie going. For it is perhaps the essential contribution or “claim” of cinema as a whole that the world in which we continue to find and re-find ourselves alive and living provides the conditions of the possibility of community even when members choose to exercise the authority of their privacy out in public. (If this is indeed what happens in movie theaters, it is worrisome that people today seem reluctant to *go to* the movies, as worrisome as people who seem reluctant to make movies by getting together with people on a set, dreading the difficulties and loss of control that come with collaboration, and anticipating with glee finding themselves solitary in front of a screen.) But rather than completely break down the distinction between private and public in a movie theater, forcing an agreement that could never satisfy the demands of both within this special situation, I shall settle for reading the specific “reply” of this quiet and

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, “More of *The World Viewed*,” in *The World Viewed*, enlarged edition, p. 212.

enclosed passivity before the exhibition of the world as simply *entertaining* “the public” on the stage of “the private.” Bonding in the dark over a world in common, we cannot know with whom we are bonding if sitting by ourselves, because the bond is with people *in general* over the world *in principle*.

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I wish to also speak to a sense of passivity with respect to the people appearing as fictional characters or as caricatures of themselves in films. I am not ascribing this sense of passivity to the characters, however, whose attitudes and interests we, too, become aligned with and invested in, for or against them; but rather to the human beings onscreen whose attitudes and interests – and everything else that tells us who they are – are always unknown to us if known or kept to themselves and, therefore, who are and are not the sum of their characterizations. The poise of the presence of the human as the character strikes me as the effect of a certain powerlessness on part of the actor, or as part of acting, to completely separate who they are from who they play during the *exposure* called for by the art of photographed performances. These performances approach purity when the characters are as flesh around stone; when the actors have tailored themselves (as opposed to their characters) to the medium of film, showing a responsibility for their role in a specific film through an understanding of their role in the specificity of the medium of film, to take their place in the myth of film: All things alive or dead assume the mystery of things-in-themselves at the moment they are made to appear again in their own light *as light*.

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Moving images make possible the opening and capturing of the intervals in the fabric of the everyday where we truly are passive and perhaps at our most true. These intervals where we have successfully put our thoughts to rest or are put to rest successfully by our thoughts – sitting down in the chair of our being while the events of today unfold much as yesterday, etc. – constitute, to be fair, not only what is most common and recurrent but also the very backdrop and average temperature, so to speak, of interior life. Upon entering and settling upon this most silent, perhaps eerily silent of intervals, moving images discover in the present passivity of the human subject something unexpected and which I have referred to as its *sense*: The bare existence of the person onscreen becomes the form (call it the focusing) not of who or what or why they are but *that* they are. This focusing of being brings the being of the person as such into view, but the person is not in the position (our position) to know that this is what has happened as a consequence. As viewers we have entered abruptly, albeit silently, as deviously undetected as the invisible presence of the filmmaker, but in getting a glimpse of solitude it is clear that no part of it can be entered *this way*. (Perhaps other ways are just as precise in their impossibility.)

When it seems that there could be no place closer to another person than at the threshold of their most intimate aloneness, that intimacy can bite back, causing us to doubt solitude as an accessible form of existence, and doubly hard when it dawns on us that its intimacy is precisely not ours to share because solitude is existence as we know it still under formation. Can we know *who* anyone is when they are no one – not one? Can we know *where* anyone is when they are perfectly alone? Does it make any sense to ask or even wish to know what someone who is by himself is thinking? And is it right to assume that thought is even underway, to assume that the look of disengagement necessarily entails

(or denotes) some kind of fastened, deliberate and enforced introspection? When we wonder what goes on in the mind of another human being we often make the assumption that there is something going on that is being withheld, while it might be the case that there is nothing at all to speak of, no secrets as it were being passed from the self to itself that the person is able or willing to keep track of and care about. Perhaps all that can be said of this most fundamental state of being by and to oneself is that the condition does not naturally avail its subject to any basis for insight into itself, and to such a degree that it can stir curiosity – even obsession – in an outside observer over what consciousness *is* when it is intending (swirling with intentionality) as opposed to being intended through reason. We might be able to guess at how someone is feeling based on the expression on their face or how they move or don't move, but the guess, however perceptive, is a breach of trust, a blow to solidarity that fails to disturb us, for consciousness is not necessarily always conscious of itself. We forget, dodging the fact of the face in front of us, that we are being inadvertently kept out or left out by the spiraling mask of solitude, a solitude whose structure is echoed in the barrier that is, so often, the moving image itself.

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In our interest in the solitary state of the other, we are in the perfect position to forget what it is like to inhabit a state of disinterestedness ourselves, to have nothing outside of us (including us) interest us, for the world to go flat and recede and lose its demand. Moreover, in forgetting this all-important fact, we are also liable to repress a common motivation underlying and fueling this very forgetfulness: that it *through* being fascinated with the cipher of another mind that the opacity of our own self-consciousness can be cleared into a false transparency, thus delaying a reluctant or fearful return to the

everyday interval of passivity. Though the clouds of solitude seem temporarily broken by the rays of *other* solitudes, the state of solitude itself is simultaneously affirmed – or lit – by those rays. This is due in part to the way in which our interest in the momentary specification of other minds or the otherness of the world necessitates the condition of our separateness from otherness, separateness being the necessary criteria for otherness. Even if we end up somehow marooned in the wild abandon of complete and utter astonishment, the closest we ever come to leaving our own minds behind is by escaping *into* them as in a fantasy. Consciousness of otherness, but particularly consciousness of the otherness of consciousness, creates a compromise that, in the last analysis, cannot really be judged unfavorable (although we might deem it diminishing) because *compromise* is precisely what consciousness is (in the Kantian sense) or does (in the Husserlian and Heideggerian sense) in order for us to *have* consciousness at all. Because the potential of consciousness can, in principle, horribly compromise (by burning) the integrity of the subject, the part of the self that preserves the self (call it the tyranny of the ‘I’) aspires to protect the self from its encounters with otherness by licking wounds into boundaries. This requires that it do one of two things, or react in one of two ways, in the event that its power of mediation is taxed to its utmost limits: either identify itself wholeheartedly with the body and go limp, or wholeheartedly with the mind and dissociate. We might hate on this “part”¹⁹ of ourselves, want to accuse it of stagnating our growth, for rendering us impervious to change and hostile to surprise, for shelling up the flying strands and flames of the spirit, but only when it is convenient for us to do so, that is, within the quiet aftermath of the compromise itself when we are safe from our flames

¹⁹ On top of not knowing what to call this part, I am reluctant to pin down in a word where and who it is in relation to us.

and believe, quite hypocritically, that danger is the only path to salvation from the inhospitable realm of the everyday. This part of ourselves that holds onto the self is the part of the self that fears losing *our* selves, losing hold, and is the cause of much regret. The fear of death, in this sense, is not the fear of passing from life, but right into the heart of it, into an instant of pure absolute life where one's life – life itself – flashes before one's eyes (as they say). And it's not simply the fear of losing control over one's life either, but not being able (lacking the means) to *become* and, more seriously, to *want* to (to strive to become those very means).

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The fear of death and the fear of change become one and the same when a single instant of a phase or a life becomes the point after which there can be no return to the land of preceding instants. The fear comes from the deep, irrepressible intuition that death and change are incomprehensible outside of dying and changing, and that dying and changing, despite preparation, are to a large extent undergone in an instant, the last instant where “we are who we are.” But that final instant is doomed, in the end, to misrepresent the entire continuum, an entire phase of a life, for it is set up to be indulged to the max as the only one worth accounting for, as if endings ended conclusively as opposed to abruptly and the self attained wholeness only at the moment of its disintegration (after which there could be no evidence to the contrary). The problem with these limit scenarios is that they cast thick concealing shadows across one too many degrees of particularity (hence of separation), making the whole scale appear to slide away from the tip turned beacon. Now all ends shine as two neighboring stars whose blinding light commands the most covetous attention to where no soul could actually find

itself alive (though it might be able to imagine, indulging itself to the max in doing so). Meanwhile, darkness reigns across the jurisdiction of the everyday, plunging where we can and do live into iciest obscurity, and with it the magnanimous struggles (more or less lost to history) of lighting our days from within.

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A passion for precision with respect to one's observations originates in, and is further inflamed by, the dispassionate capacity of consciousness to hone in, scrutinize, constitute, and eventually altogether forsake its object. For the scrupulously detached type of observer, this capacity can be strategically wielded as an epistemological safeguard, preventing the outpour of any excess motive, investment or fulfillment by conditioning the passion of the observer whose integrity and discipline in the face of chance is perhaps more important when knowledge of the world is being valued as opposed to, say, self-knowledge. Precautions against the disproportionate implication of the subject in the object of study certainly belong to a valid enough method for epistemological pursuits organized around standards of objectivity, but that doesn't necessarily make them sound even if the methods employed satisfy all our criteria for what soundness is, because the subject's inescapable (albeit non-phenomenological) basis of influence upon an object and the object, in turn, reflecting that influence back upon the subject is being forsaken – stared through or conveniently bypassed or crudely comprehended – and at the same time, quite necessarily (and perhaps a bit phenomenologically), as the object itself as a whole is lost sight of. This is never a coincidence and therefore, at the very least, ought not to be dismissed by one. The standard of objectivity commits us to an extreme poise

that calls for some rather unpleasant pretense in order to passionately perform the magic trick of self-effacement.

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In seeing something that releases the full force of sight, is it nevertheless possible through sight alone to find oneself *out* as if dragged by the world's surf, amalgamated, baptized by the world, to be returned not unlike a piece of driftwood to our shores, no longer of the land nor anymore of the sea? Since the activity of seeing is, all too often, ruled by rote and hence anticlimactically harmless, the near absence of any impact or disorienting intimacy as a result of it points not so much to the weakness of sight to put us who see back in touch (in a touching relation with the world) and set us down where the real pavement starts, but rather to the effectiveness or strength of sight in bringing the world close without us having to close in on it, when all we want to do is see instead of experience it. Whether or not this is what we want of sight does not change the *role* of sight (at least as we typically see it play out): to sort out the field of intelligibility, our inextricable relation with the stuff of perception, and establish a more linear connection between cognition and experience via the senses. An analogy from spectatorship in the visual arts would be the instinct, perhaps lasting no more than a split-second, to perceive a perfectly realistic painting as if it were no different than a photograph. Here, the act of seeing shoots past what is there on the canvas and what that canvas actually is – a painting – to what it is *of*, as if the painting itself were somehow in the way or obstructing the view.²⁰ Such a misrepresentation or misstep, in this case and in others less formal, is

²⁰ The example, I realize, isn't that good because the same practice could occur while viewing a photograph, as if it were no different than reality. But since photographs refer

no less attributable to an irresponsible – insofar as it is dangerous – use of the power of sight as a window to rest against. The danger is that the complacency incurred (and perhaps relished) by the near self-sufficiency of sight entails being “used by” sight to fulfill its role to present the world through, as opposed to *with*, the “glass” of the eye, and have a gullible or blind faith in seeing.

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That good things come to those who wait is the myth of revelations, despite the virtue of patience promoted. He who waits in the forest for the animals to venture forth from their secret abodes could, upon patience paying off, easily mistake his anxiety for that of astonishment. But even astonishment, to the extent that it isn't completely reducible to mindless thrill in the face of the wildly new, admits within the astonished a *truth-feeling* that, however profound and perspicuous and promising, is inevitably *superficial* – merely a promise – to the person who had not worked out a precise enough reason for setting out to discover a solution to or even a sign of a problem and thought that good things would come by simply waiting out the bad. The brutal irony here is that trust in a so-called self-manifesting and hence self-evident truth, as nothing more than a conception of truth as some sort of “metaphysical rhetoric” of revelation, *is a problem* – the problem of positioning not just truth but also human experience outside the reach of language so that the conception of truth as “that which holds *despite* experience” can stay held. Patience can take on an air of cleverness, assuming its own form of rhetoric, when used to strategize the moment of wildest abandon if one doesn't know quite what to expect, or to want, from yielding to the unknown. Not knowing what to do with or about an insight

to reality, perhaps viewers can be excused for putting the latter first, although not, perhaps, at the expense of the existence of the former.

after it has arrived as if out of the blue is not the result of not knowing how to make it apply, but rather of not knowing why it needs to work at all, that is, for anyone else besides. Thus the most significant first step of the process of learning from one's own experience is to keep fresh insights from staying secrets to language and, as Emerson might advise, find the intuition the appropriate *tuition*. This does not mean that the insight or intuition should be rushed off into expression, for that would only exacerbate the whole problem of prematurity. The idea, ideally, would be to wait (exhausting as opposed to manipulating patience) until one has thoroughly understood one's experience in terms of its "thought" – grasping the circumstances of one's understanding – before giving oneself cause to think everything through and aloud. But, in a not so ideal world, the person doing the explaining or demonstrating will need the explanation or demonstration to satisfy his or her own understanding as urgently as anyone who does not understand at all what was said or written before it was shown that it happens. All this to say that what we do *after* an idea has been felt or observed as an intuition or insight is as significant to it as, and thus a possible continuation from, what we did *before* catching hold of it to have been the appropriate net for it.

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To approach or conceptualize the world as a closed circuit of forces flowing beyond the purview of language (despite "the world" we construct within language) is the prize (but no less the price) of skepticism. Part of the price is that one's presence *to* the world becomes a martyrdom for the survival *of* the world as purely and unambiguously knowable. As for the prize, the world that is won is not necessarily this one here and now, but still only some or other world, or the world "in theory" and "absolutely" within which

consciousness cannot dwell – finding itself at home on the fringe precisely at the point where it can have no doubt. Descartes, in winning his existence from skepticism, goes on to trust that *he is* as long as the conditions for existence that survived the onslaught of an indiscriminate or absolute skepticism *maintain*. Those conditions state that because he thinks he must therefore exist, which means that he only exists on the condition that he thinks. But by virtue of existing *in this way*, “he” (all he has to exist by) is profoundly (not just theoretically) *subject* to anything and anyone, real or not, that he cannot think away no matter how hard he might philosophically try. Even if everything that comes to him through his senses – the world – is suspected of being the designs of an “evil genius” who wants nothing more than to thwart his quest for an absolute foundation of epistemological certitude, he is bound to be *there* in good conscience to acknowledge what he may or may not take for knowledge and, in the process, confront the possibility of his own (the subject’s) contingency in the world.

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Contingency awareness (of the world, of oneself in the world, and perhaps in that order) can compromise the sturdiness and overall health of the will. It does so not by directly circumventing or sedating the will’s commitment to necessitating its existence, but rather through a form of self-consciousness with respect to the will that substitutes a mosaic of parallel and continuous willing agents for a more static and coherent and, as it were, global picture of the world. The world as a metaphysical base upon or within which various interactions play out day to day is here transformed into an infinitely layered and borderless continuum whose instants are the manifestations of agency. Awareness of the contingency of the external thus commits the subject to an awareness of the necessity of

the internal, albeit a necessity that is no match (at first) for the contingency that gave birth to it, for the outside rule of contingency is such that it takes on an *illusory necessity* which impedes as much as it promotes the freedom of the will (or promotes by way of oppression as opposed to censorship). Therefore, any and all acts of will that are disproportionate (i.e. willed disproportionately) in the context of the grand scheme of human agency are trivialized down to their actual size – the size, shape and weight of the single individual instant – the moment the effects or consequences of those acts take on a life of their own (i.e. in the world of another life). This process of trivialization, however, invariably begins, it seems to me, within the psychology of the agent: A single individual will *loses sight of the fact* that the continuum referenced by the excess of effort taken to stand out from it, or leave a trace in it, or simply take part in it, is ultimately comprised of equally singular subjects. And as long as these subjects, regardless of their authority, blur for the will into a single and self-sufficient continuum, as long as others in the world cease to figure in the very *idea* of a world present for all, this false collectivity will conjure, in turn, and regardless of the sensitivity of its members, an effect of trivialization for that individual. This effect reaches the frontier of the individual conscious of contingency (that is, of the mosaic of agency) in frighteningly no time at all because it enters *from within* in the form of his or her anxiety over the paradox of his or her own necessity.

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“Contingency,” writes Agnes Heller, “feeds on the dissatisfaction of modern men and women; constancy in dissatisfaction is the manifestation of contingency.”²¹

Dissatisfaction is not the feeling of being empty, right now and no assured means of fulfillment, but rather of being *left* empty, after the wearing off of fulfillment or due to the failure of an attempt at fulfillment. What differentiates the latter is not just the shift in tense to a past state of affairs (coping with a bad aftertaste, having a memory of coming up short) but, more significantly, the uncertainty in the present as to what exactly went wrong in the will, which can be a rather constructive way of inquiring into the cause(s) behind the perpetual renewal (and perhaps even the significance) of disappointment. We want to know the general prognosis regarding the potentiality (call it the health) of our existence in the world (being in a contingent world, contingently being in a contingent world) so that our plight can become our purpose: the constant cultivation of personal ideals rather than the never-ending or hypothetical or purely imaginary pursuit of them. We want to know *where we stand* so as to better understand where we are and where we might go, which will determine, perhaps, how we can stand with respect to each other and keep the same company no matter where we end up. We want answers to these questions, at bottom, so as to know what it is safe for us to want, what it is within us to achieve before we set out to achieve something without knowing beforehand if it is possible or, if it is, whether or not it can be sustained over time and, if so, stave off a life of solitude. An achievement, as I understand it, is deceiving as a mere success, for all successes declared as possessions – logged, as it were – are to be found in the past. From there they can do very little, and amount to almost nothing for their owner, as they

²¹ Agnes Heller, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 29.

successfully litter the present with shadows, darkening the horizon of the will by surrounding it with the delusion that the mere repetition and consolidation of past fulfillment is more important than the struggle it fundamentally depends on. The only kind of success fit for transport into the present is the success one becomes as a result of whatever successes one wishes to bring but ends up leaving behind. (There is, after all, no limit on what we can bring because there is no basis in which to become what we bring. We, as it were, embody that limit and keep it at zero if we choose to know and respect what our limits are.) Here lies the power, infinitely greater than the possession, to succeed even the success of one's self. The successful achievement that takes the self as its own successor is thus better described not through any material terms, but rather as a turning point after which one's life, and only then, is the accomplishment of it. In the end, if we want to feel a sense of accomplishment before, after and during, regardless what we're doing, we must continue to accomplish what we have accomplished; we must never assume that we have accomplished anything that we say we have, despite all we have to show for it. But the only accomplishment for which these paradoxical criteria make any sense is the *accomplishing* of the self, the *striving* of the self through, into, and out of life. It is accomplished, paradoxically, when our disappointment satisfies us, when contingency calms us (more on this later) – when we have earned the right through our deepest and heaviest and most self-directed efforts to be disappointed with the lack of our perfection (not our imperfection but rather our failure to perfect what we deem, for a time, perfect) so that tomorrow may be rejoiced, and then the day after tomorrow. Today, both tomorrow and the day after are uncertain *as* commensurable days in their own right, which is to say they are indiscernible from each other in the near future, contingent. But

for all its distinction, today is as uncertain (spared of tomorrow's contingency by nothing more than the contrivances of the calendar for a spinning planet) because we do not have cause – today is not the necessary cause – to look forward to them – one by one – for the best of reasons. Those reasons could have us looking ahead in our own calendars, no longer in anticipation but *presciently* this time, giving ourselves the right to have cause (as the cause) to celebrate the days (steps) to come at the morning table of today.

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“From contingency to necessity – this is the way of all problematic individuals.”²²

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In 1844, in an essay entitled “Experience,” Ralph Waldo Emerson asked this question: “Where do we find ourselves?”²³ He was far from the first to do so. His age was far from the first to find itself lost, somewhere in between where it has been and where it is headed or, somewhat less successively, where it was and what's to come. And he was far from the only one willing to face the deeper, more cumbersome question of how – on what grounds – one should persist in finding a way out (*in or to or back or around*). At the beginning of the 14th century, Dante seems so sure of being precisely nowhere (perhaps as close to something as unreachable as Paradise as anywhere) that he begins *The Divine Comedy* with a confession so casual that it could pass for a greeting between strangers: “Midway along the journey of life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / for I had

²² Georg Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1974), p. 21.

²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode in Collaboration with Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1981), p. 266.

wandered off from the straight path.”²⁴ Emerson’s question, perhaps for being the later of the two, and perhaps also for being such a simple question with such a complex tone of irony and sincerity, sounds to me that much more solemn, disappointed. It’s the kind of melancholy sentiment that has been disguised as a question time and again, and answered again and again with the same ambivalent urgency, but only for whatever it is that gets us worrying about our potential for progress to come back again, sharper now than ever before, and increasingly double-edged: Can a question such as Emerson’s and a confession the likes of Dante’s – whose answers and responses have not only failed to curb suspicion but added fuel to the flow of suspicion over an entire history of signs clearly marking acts of human progress and regress (both separately and in tandem) – be asked seriously (positively and with soul) anymore, and thus be spared the costly fate of becoming permanently rhetorical, triggering pessimistically ironic sigh-like responses such as “lost” or “stranded” or “exiled” or “nowhere” to the crucial human question of how much fate is ours to decide: *Where do we find ourselves?* (Perhaps it would be worth testing the extent in which contingency has come in between us and our language, if it has come from the space created (or torn) between language and the world.)

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So, where do you think we currently find ourselves? – Why do you ask? – Because we have not moved. – But how could that be? – We are not the answer to our very own question. – Fine. Let’s state the question then, the matter, simply and sincerely, as you see it. – Watch. Why are we not, and nowhere near, where we want to be? – I take it that we can all speak for ourselves on this count, but I will grant you the philosophical

²⁴ Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, in *The Portable Dante*, ed. and trans. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1995), p. 3.

tradition to which this question belongs, specifically the branch of existentialism that tries to start philosophy *again*, as if from nothing, by associating the crisis of meaning, or meaninglessness, with nothingness and the symptom of nausea. But I want to answer your question with another question, for your question, simple as it is, is insincere to the extent that it does not ask to be answered before its gravity is thoroughly weighed: If, then, it is just as true that we can find ourselves unfound, if Dante and Emerson and Lukacs and others too innumerable can be said to *know* the coordinates of this and perhaps their own lostness, what then is the point of implying that we are lost if it prevents us from finding ourselves *at a loss*? – At a loss for what? – For words, for starters. – But we don't stay lost to them for long. – Yes, which is why as soon as we start to reach for them we stop the search for experiences to replace them with, new ways of being at home at a loss. – You mean the experience of being in the dark that called for them in the first place? – And which is irreplaceable. – Because it is irretrievable. – So we cannot be in two places at once, lost *and* found. – It seems it's the two people we cannot be, for what we want and what we get are two separate things. – Perhaps in between the wanting and the getting, our thoughts and our words, our actions and our life, we find our *selves*. – Each chasing the other's dream. – Each the other's better half.

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Striving, though it might swell at the heart of desire, functions as the heart of realization, but our heart's desire is not always *in* the activity of realization. Out of the same tendency for backs that labor to waver and go limp, striving dips in and out of consciousness as it were, taking steps forward and backward out of a fundamental inability for he or she who strives to remain still. But why is striving so painfully laborious? Why must we push

ourselves to strive in a particular direction? And what stops us, once in motion, from moving in stride with ourselves, from keeping up and seeing through, taking our actions one step at a time – taking our time – so as not to stress them the louder? Why is the fruit of this labor – our living labor – an unacceptable reward when reaped, inedible and offensive and sometimes even depleting to one's verve? And how is it that boredom, amidst this potential, has become the most natural, hospitable and home-like, despite the suffering? This storm of questions – none of which are meant nor could ever be enough to put just anyone down, or justify regret, or set a standard for resignation – has its eye, I think, within the eerie quotidian quietude of boredom where the mystery can be written as follows: What is it that we do when we aren't doing anything, while doing nothing, inescapably being, just being, when we could be doing so much *more* but not any *less*, boredom being the absolute limit of what we can't *not* "do"? First, we must dispense with the breaking impression that boredom is laziness, for although it's the case, perhaps all too often the case, that the two are sometimes synonymous with each other that they are not worth distinguishing anymore, "laziness," the word, aside from typically referring to an action as opposed to a state (compare "I am being lazy" with "I am being boring" and watch their common sense split and start to drift), has the function of laying judgment – and what judgment is not necessarily a bit premature? – upon the peculiar time and space of boredom. The critic, blinded by the utilitarian belief that doing nothing is akin to not doing anything, which is akin to being useless, perceives the scene of boredom as static, shapeless, barren and paradoxically both wasteful and destitute; all the while overlooking a fundamental mode of being in its own right – and one of the most contagiously human at that – where self-consciousness and unconsciousness clash as heaven and hell on earth.

And yet, despite this apocalypse of consciousness, no other experience can come and go so quickly and easily, or idle away so casually and calmly and near harmlessly (again, despite the extreme tension); and it is unlike any other in this way in that it's the only experience whose dynamic is both singular and self-sustaining. All other experiential dynamics are reducible to phenomenological intersections, and to inhabit such an intersection is to be a participant in a physical encounter. There, one emerges into a crossroads where there is an important decision to be made about whether or not to seek mindfulness of the other participant – a complete and living spectacle of otherness. But to be bored, especially when at ease as opposed to at war with boredom, is to dwell outside such decisions – as if in a state of exception or immunity – to the extent that one is therein not facing or being faced with anything other to oneself, which is the result of the decision not to expose one's face or relinquish one's perfect faceless potential by dissenting to the critic's conviction that one must *do* in order to *be*. What is "decided" in boredom, then, is to be no one, not one, not the one who one is to oneself before others, and to let things pass, doing nothing *out of* the ordinary while never succeeding to do nothing absolutely. (The anxiety of boredom that is part and parcel of not being definable to ourselves, where self-consciousness falls short or altogether contradicts criteria of self-definition, keeps us from realizing that absolute, leaving intact a certain immemorial nostalgia for it – the tranquility of total anonymity). Bored, the slumber of being to or for oneself (avoiding being *as* oneself) is disturbed and made restless by stubborn knocks to become this or that, otherwise or more, to become measurable and identifiable to others and thus to oneself, but for what? If boredom is consciousness at its most intelligible and transparent, to what *end* must we depart from it, and for what *purpose* has boredom itself

been set by us as an alarm typically timed to go off well before anyone – conscience included – dares to knock? The potential endlessness of boredom tells us that there is no being told, and we cannot tell ourselves the truth of this matter, for consciousness has already broken the structure of being as truth has broke with Being itself.

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What, for what, is this *doing*, our decisive doing – the thought and action of all human striving? What is it to do something and then have that thing done and move onto the next thing? The always-pressing question of what *to do* seems rather petty, lighthearted, in the very least premature, in comparison to what, if anything (like a thing, ontologically “thingly”), doing *does*. To ask “What does doing do?” can nevertheless seem severely strange, as some sort of misplaced questioning of praxis or delusion of skepticism (or perhaps more accurately of the merely and frivolously skeptical). The question, no doubt, is an act of skepticism aimed at the nature of the will, although one might still want to say of it that it merely fuels skepticism itself, that is, any form of skepticism whatsoever, and therefore does not truthfully ask a question. Should one commit to this doubly skeptical position of questioning the grounds of certain questions, the questions “what is doing?” and “what does doing do?” might not be given the benefit of the doubt, and the person who asks them might then be regarded as less concerned with an answer than with the ability to pose questions unsuspectingly and hence gratuitously. But that would be assuming too much, or assuming as unscrupulously as the question was thought (hoped) to be skeptical. It would be much simpler if the question by itself, that is, on its own terms, could reveal itself as being empty; but the fact that it *can* be asked, that the point of asking it has been more or less logically reached, fills it with potential importance and

guidance. But how are we to tell the difference between questions asked skeptically and those asked accurately, as a result of or as a response to a very real problem (skepticism, for example)? In answering this question let's try asking not the original question but the questioning itself. What could spur the question "What does doing do?" Perhaps when it becomes apparent to us that, as doers, we own nothing through which to do anything with or about what we have gone on to do, that we lack the precise means (call it the instrument) to return to what we've done and reclaim it as the person who both did it and did not do it. Does this mean that we must ultimately fail to satisfy what we managed to accomplish? The burden of having to begin all over again could be significantly alleviated if we knew where best to end up, that is, how to end up not just at the end but *in* it somehow. But in order to know where that end is – how to end up in the form as opposed to the guise of being done – one would first have to know if one could tell the difference between an ending and a new beginning. My intuition is that the first clue to having come full circle as opposed to having closed a circle off might be a relatively consistent (to the point of being consistently relative) sense of calm. The calm of not being able to have any regrets about what we have done, calmed by every anticipation over what we will do to continue doing what we did, as if what doing "did" was do our future in with a life full of unfinished business . . . But this is so much speculation, easier said than done (especially when "doing" is the subject spoken), and no less the quickest way out of skepticism.

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What keeps us from realizing our "worlds"? Is the world itself relentlessly and overpoweringly standing and single, or is there something amiss, merely half-lived in our

efforts to live in it? Or does the matter bear less on the fundamental limits and constraints of our condition in the world than on the unconstrained limitlessness of the desire to escape that condition? Do we, in general, and for whatever reason, avoid the labor of realization, discounting its prospect by deeming the sweetest of fruit too difficult to grow, opting instead to wait for our lives to start in a perpetual meantime the hospitality of which is total, demanding that we do nothing to cultivate the immanency of the future within a present overgrown with the unfinished business of the past? This could go on. There are numerous sides to the complex suspiciousness of our great and monumental potentiality. The point is, rather, that we do not appear to know, can't picture aloud, nor have any basic reference for a life lived in one name only – the name we call our/selves and never our lives – as if life remained its own property regardless of who or how it is lived.

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Are we not responsible (somehow accountable to ourselves) for using the words we say (and presumably mean to others) to convey the intention to act on them, for was it not so that to have said them was to have acted *by* them? Is it not our responsibility, and if necessary our duty, to keep the promise that words *are* so that expressions formed can have meaning beyond, beyond the consciousness of meaning? But under what circumstances could the keeping of this promise necessarily translate into the structured silence of *realization*, where a beginning is finally built according to plan? Language inspires us not to overcome it but rather to use it further, to expand and transform our vocabulary as a way of rejuvenating our experience. Such inspiration, however, runs the risk of fusing language with experience by confining or reducing experience to language,

which might keep us from discovering what our language might mean if we could just stand by what we said. We can say whatever we want, and anything is speakable as long as we have managed to lay our mind's eye on it, be it from a distance or up close, and imagine, vividly or not, what we are trying to talk about. But the sense of meaning, at its core, is entirely dictated by the rules and conventions – the structure – of the language that frees it into speech. Perhaps there is another sense at work, beneath the meaning of the words, regarding what a speaker can actually want from meaning, harboring only the vaguest sense of what meaning might entail should its promise be kept, or followed, in a movement away from language altogether.

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To live a life in which it is possible not only to speak but *act* with fluency requires taking to task the promise of language by overcoming all the excuses and justifications and explanations contagious to the contingency of language. It is difficult to take the right kind of responsibility for what we say when the only functioning import of language is grammar and where the lone tie between language and the world is that of history. That is why realization is fundamentally a commitment to forever contending with the appropriation of contingency into necessity; and yet, as is the case with any big decision or sacrifice, something fundamental to the self's contingent condition is lost, however much for the best, for good: the fantasy of an absolute or non-conditional freedom, impossible possibilities of starting over at any time and place, achieving all, and becoming one's destiny, in a word, realizing one's world. Transforming contingency into necessity no longer condemns us to absolute freedom but to absolute finitude as the condition of freedom. And although finitude provides the freedom to chart, pursue and

expand one's limits, it is a freedom won from the fact that limits get pushed by respecting instead of opposing them. The freedom in finitude is thus freighted with the fact that one cannot logically oppose oneself without being, in part, the newer self. The price of finding oneself always lost in between one self and the next self – midway through life, off the straight path, in a dark wood, awakening – is that what appears as the realization of a world is nothing more or less than a process of self-realization.

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The desire to anthropomorphize contingency and honor the world with a will (the will that opposes our will to create it anew) in a time when humanity has reclaimed the power of will for itself alone (thus, as it were, anthropomorphizing itself), is a response to the realization that the substitution of contingency for necessity, of possibility for impossibility, of self-creation for self-sacrifice, has the consequence of bringing about a peculiar and unprecedented bareness – a conditioned (or contingent) necessity – to life itself, causing the will to turn against the necessity of contingency to mold that bareness into an image worthy of the will's total emancipation. But this infinitely complex nakedness, this metaphysical nakedness, this uncultivated wildness of contingency, will also "*accidentally determine*," in the end, our progress along the infinite scale of degrees across which a form of life capable of will can become the embodiment of its will. As the foundation of our freedom, contingency gains the force of determination over our freedom (as the law of freedom) because freedom in the context of finitude requires the friction of "how things are" and "who one is" – the absence of illusions within the clarity of intellectual conscience – to keep it from a wholesale identification with raw potentiality. The idea here, if it can be put this way, is that the will can will what it wills,

nothing stops it from willing what it can, but in the end we will *what* we will (if we will at all) and at the same time, it would appear, as the possible passes into the actual, presencing presences, becoming becomes. “For our relation to the world, to brute power and to naked pain, is not the sort of relation we have to persons. Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have an ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain. The final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy – the final victory of metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery – would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that this is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have.”²⁵ The highest expression of will, which isn’t necessarily its highest achievement or apotheosis, would be the will to recognize, perhaps while bending the world *to* one’s will, that only the *coming-to-pass* and not *that which* comes to pass, the *experience* of the event and not *the content* of the event, is within the reach of the will *to will again* as if for the first time. It is for this reason, I think, that Nietzsche often approached the pure act of will as an affirmative instead of a purely creative act.²⁶

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How can we humanize our being in the world without anthropomorphizing the world itself? This question presumes a number of things on both sides of the equation. First, that human beings have a reality that is separate from the world, a reflection or refraction of it. Second, that this reality is comprised of our conscious and unconscious making. Third, that it is primarily about what we feel and think and need as beings struggling to

²⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass., and New York: Cambridge University press, 1989), p. 40. (Rorty’s emphasis)

²⁶ See Book Four of *The Gay Science*, p. 221-275.

master an existence in which we are thrown, which is why the world can sometimes appear to come in between (for better and for worse) us and *our* world. The question then goes on to presume, or wager, that human consciousness and the world in which humans find themselves conscious intersect at a bad place or in a bad, combative way, such that the constitutive capacity of consciousness is called upon to interpret, over-determine and dominate its surroundings at whatever cost to ethics and truth. Call this cost cruelty – to others by way of misguided retaliation and/or to oneself by way of self-serving self-deception peaking with narcissism. Finally, the question seems to rhetorically imply that human beings should not anthropomorphize the world, or risk confusing our conceptions of reality with it as a result of our attempts to make the world a habitable place, that humanization should remain a human affair. I can accept this conclusion as extending from the preceding points, but do not know *how much* to agree with it despite knowing a bit of the grounds, an extension of not knowing how much “space” actually exists between reality and the world independently of how we refer to them (slightly but significantly distinct in our everyday usage). Perhaps it is the case that space of this kind can only exist *within* a reality where room has been made for the world to interject with fresh opportunities for cross-reference from the outside and self-consciousness from the inside. To take our making sense of the world to apply to the world itself would be to take the world to be that which lacks sense as opposed to our being in it; and to make sense of our being in *this* sense is to call upon our imaginations to humanize reality by becoming *more* human in a world that need not show signs of corroboration (i.e. take on human qualities) for humanization to matter. By letting the world take credit for our own architectures of existence we relinquish our ownership of them, hence the power – and

maybe even the right – to draft up new plans upon changing our minds for how best to endure. But as long as we continue to try to make sense of things there is always the risk in doing so once and for all with a permanent metaphysical plot. I also sincerely doubt that anyone, if given the chance in their quest for truth, would actually know how or even want to know the truth of their own magnanimous disillusion or make disillusionment the condition of *all* knowledge, especially if the question of how best to endure is known to lay buried somewhere within disillusionment itself. It seems, therefore, that to take precautions against this tendency and temptation to anthropomorphize entails taking them at the expense of what is still weak in our humanity, but which we know, nonetheless, to be still so specific to it, specifying to a large extent what it is to be human.

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In *The Virtual Life of Film*, we catch D.N. Rodowick musing over the double directionality (window and mirror) of the moving image as one that heads for the outside world while destined for the inside world: “Perhaps the gateway to our present inner life, what we value in our current mode of existence, is through the experience of surface reality in the matrix of its duration? Perhaps film’s particular attentiveness to the external life that surrounds us leads back to and enriches a mental or psychological life that is bereft of anchors in unchallenged universals?”²⁷ The hypothesis here (one worth valuing, it seems to me, regardless of the outcome) is that to observe an observation of extreme particularity, of contingency, of a world that is *all* surface, is one way of coming to value what is without any underlying metaphysical value. It is also a way of using contingency against itself by using its cinematic concreteness to overcome the fear that a full

²⁷ D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, p. 77-8.

acknowledgement of universal contingency will invariably turn the self against itself by reducing consciousness to a wall cutting off interiority from exteriority into fundamentally separate camps of our psychological life. Thus it is worth following more closely how an appropriation of moving image contingency in particular could come to pass through a rerouting of the external to the internal by way of – though it is still a metaphor – a window transformed into a mirror. First, moving images establish contingency through the reticent and intractable forms of external world particularity. Second, time sentences particularity to ephemerality, carrying cinematic space beyond the mode of its representation and the grasp of our subjectivity. As a result, a moving image of the world is prohibited (prohibits itself) from operating as a gateway into the depiction it so clearly appears to be, though in lieu of the fact that such images succeed so well to represent the world in the absence of its actual presence they are certainly less readily apparent as gateways into the interior of the viewer. The gate, therefore, would have to be shut; and a gate that is shut is no different from a wall, like the wall at the back of a cave. Wall-like, beyond the wall that consciousness already is, moving images remind consciousness that the world *as we know it* (the shadows of perception) is uninhabitable because impenetrable, that is, without a mediating reality to literally ground the world as such. A wall facing another wall could then potentially put us who are behind one and in front of the other back in touch with the very subjectivity that, in Cavell's understanding of modern skepticism, became interposed between us and the world also like a wall.²⁸ Moving images of the world reinforce the modern structure of

²⁸ I extrapolate this idea of a “wall” as a metaphor for skepticism from the following lines from *The World Viewed*: “At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the

existential distance by showing us just how *intimate* our distance from the world can be. The clarity, closeness and intimacy of this image of distance is a revelation of our desire to gain access to ourselves and become one again with ourselves by way of the world. The claim of contingency, while for Peirce and other philosophers of science stands as a critique of the argument from mechanical necessity, here assumes the form of an appeal (perhaps a final appeal) to grounds for psychological necessity, stating that what appears in the world with the force of contingency appears forceful in front of us because we necessitated it without realizing it. This is the gradual process by which we take back possession of the world that possessed us throughout our developing years, of everything that happened to us before becoming masters of our own existence. Freud's world, in short, wherein contingency and necessity are meaningful concepts not only in reference to the world as it is or as we know it, but also, and perhaps primarily, to he or she who claims *one over the other* with respect to a given particular of his or her life. And in viewing moving images of the world, especially as part of a substantial and significant way of leading rich inner lives, we are on the lookout for the psychological necessity of contingent particulars.

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The self is still founded upon the thing that bears it, the body, which seems incapable of bearing anything else that the self, perfectly willed, could not eventually do away with. Emerson ascribed this condition to an all but malevolent temperament of objects where an ontological "evanescence and lubricity,"²⁹ an intrinsic lack of availability or

world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation."(22)

²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *The Portable Emerson*, p. 269.

forgiveness to our procedures and poetics of knowing, becomes the primary cause of our failure to expose, explore and participate in their nature. But there is no sense accusing the objects around us of being dodgy or temperamental or even malevolent towards our advances. Such a response is a desire or delusion that is ultimately rooted to an even deeper source (deeper, perhaps, than the Being of a being) within our very own hands, hands *held*, as it were, with a touch as if mediated by a tool: what Emerson calls “the most unhandsome part of our condition.”³⁰ The object of attention suddenly slips from our knowing grasp not because it is “ontologically slippery” but rather because *all* objects must *eventually* slip away, that is, pass away in our hands the moment we lose interest. Why do we pick some up and hold others close if not for reasons of our own, reasons anterior *to* the object regardless how characteristic *of* the object? So it is that in reaching out in the direction of objects we cannot grasp them, however briefly, without spilling something of ourselves – call it our criteria for what counts. Focused in this way, primed with the idiosyncrasies of preference, grips tighten in proportion to their resistance, that is, disproportionately as reactions to resistance, releasing in great volume the unconscious stores of value, causing the object to go missing. We cannot know what we opt to hold, what we seek to know for reasons of need, and for no other reason than such reasons are nowhere to be found with the object so close.

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Past the body, but in consciousness, the objects of the world – the ones there to ascertain and the ones made ascertainable – are *our* other side. This is not the contradiction it appears to be, for when played out in actual circumstances we tend to remain confined, or

³⁰ Ibid.

to confine ourselves, to our *own* side. Here, standing to the world, face forward, looking is the opposite of what touching is. But touching, I would say, is very often to do nothing more than to confirm as opposed to continue the act of looking, causing it to lose out to looking, to fail to take up what is seen and expound upon it, which is how we normally touch and why, perhaps, we typically hesitate to touch. Touching in a spirit of confirmation is ironically self-protective, and yet the power of perception to let loose the perceiver into the realm of the perceptible is within it to unlock. One is perceived only by what one can truly touch, where touching is to *be* touched and where being touched is to know *through* being known. In coming to know others and otherness in the world it strikes me as intuitively necessary to now and then become something knowable in it. Otherwise it is impossible to *come to* any knowledge but only on the contrary to have claimed to, that is, for one's knowledge to be reducible to, and therefore the sole property of, *claims*. Call the emergence of knowledge from the experience of being known the experience of knowledge as the morality of knowing, or *self-knowledge*.

Chapter 3

Reading our Rights of Passage

“But like one who walks alone and in the twilight I resolved to go so slowly, and to use so much circumspection in all things, that if my advance was but very small, at least I guarded myself well from falling.” Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*

“I approach deep problems like cold baths: quickly into them and quickly out again. That one does not get to the depths that way, not deep enough down, is the superstition of those afraid of the water, the enemies of cold water; they speak without experience. The freezing cold makes one swift.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

“It isn’t necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don’t even listen, just wait. Don’t wait, be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy.” Franz Kafka, *The Zuru Aphorisms*

It is still possible, after all, for wordlessness to be as significant a response to a work of art or piece of criticism as an essay. The “response” is a potentially significant one because silence, for the lack of a better word, so often marks the beginning of any serious commitment to a responding, particularly one whose reciprocation is both voluntary and involuntary. Within the unstable and somewhat vindictive silence of the beginning, we do not yet know how to know what we think.¹ There is no point yet to our

¹ Who are “we,” exactly? Or to whom does the “our” of this chapter’s title refer whose rights of passage can be read aloud, here in writing? It seems these sorts of pronouns (whose temptation of universal applicability is tough to resist) must logically refer to critics, interpreters, creators of things already created – writers, in the end, who begin by reading. So why am I not more respectfully specific here – specific in the very least to the specificity of what I myself am doing in writing about reading and (and as) writing – and call you by your rightful name: a reader who writes? My brief and tentative answer to this is that for those cases where wordlessness is not a calm before the storm but rather the

position, nothing so dry and removed as a conviction or hypothesis to step up to and look down from, as the work goes on working. The state one can sometimes find oneself inhabiting, or inhabited by, is a stranded one, and there is nothing at all we must necessarily say or do about what has occurred (and not occurred) nor why. We are under no outside obligation to subject our experiences of a text (experienced, say, as a geography of meaning) to the scrutiny (compass) of language, and yet we almost always do, we almost always end up forming some sort of account (in some cases a calculation) for what has been done to us as a result of reading and which we help bring upon ourselves. To think or speak or write in rigorous response to resonant encounters with certain texts very often proceeds under the duress of an inner duty, an implacable itch, to rectify an *original* wordlessness. Original in the sense – its original sense – of originating: Not being able to exactly know what we've come to understand (hence not fully understanding) but not being able to stay wordless about it either is the first step, the beginning, in finding our way in language – a way of life in language – by struggling to speak our very own speechlessness. Speechlessness rectified *says*: A silence was never empty if it had the power, like a spell, to be broken. To speak such a language, to word an inaugurating wordlessness as a result of and with respect to a given text, would thus require the honoring and exhaustion of an implicit or latent set of terms (that is, the full extent of what we set out for ourselves in coming-to-terms with something which has

wake of a storm of sensation that is the ominous fading or forgetting of reading (those many cases of aesthetic encounter which never officially open up as investigations), *we* are too intact, too noticeably the same, to go by any other name than the most general, improper and unassuming – one that stands for us and not we for it. What it takes for someone – anyone – to cease to read and become a reader of a text – any text – and in the process become something written to themselves – open to themselves like a book, like a case up for investigation – is the concern of this chapter and, I hope, its permission *not* to perform the reading it promotes.

already arrived at its own terminology), and hence a precarious commitment to nothing less than *all* one's words.

If a text is the sort of thing that can ask or even demand from the reader or viewer the writing of another text, then such a return commitment, it seems to me, is entitled to support the logic of its own internal susceptibility by forming a separate, private set of terms and conditions to which it is just as responsible for abiding as those publicized within the reading process itself. Not just one but *two sets* of terms and conditions (those of the reading and the reader-turned-writer) maintain for an interpretation whose process of investigation is, as it were, two-way and double-edged to the extent that something like creativity, something like starting over and standing at the helm of a new mission, is required to turn the hinge from reading to writing. The ambivalent, excruciating, and exhausting (because hopelessly inexhaustible) effort at settling upon a rational estimate of the relationship between a text's force or impact (its claim of authority) and its value (its right to that authority) is such that a reading committed to negotiating the two can be undergone gradually, inconspicuously, perhaps even tacitly, in the direction of a categorically different mode of coming-to-terms that acknowledges the workings of another wholly latent text, one whose writing occurs, precisely, through the very commitment to, and hence to the consequences of, writing. I mean the "text" of the investment in a particular text as the exposure (out on a limb) that comes with being invested for reasons both known and unknown (reasons suspected at the beginning and knowable, or officially identifiable, only at the end). The sneaking suspicion at the beginning that the end holds in store key secrets *about* the beginning, I wish to suggest, is an accurate and hence sincere response (and basis of pursuit) to the possibility or chance

for personal stakes to become legitimately and effectively *at stake* within a particular reading of a no less particular text via a no less textual (because historical, hence particular) reader.

The concept of particularity – pointing to one thing (*this*) and not another (*that*) and in the direction of otherness (*mystery*) – points to the possibility for epistemological unpredictability, for something unpredictable within our experience to rearrange or thwart or altogether ignore our most vicarious conceptual schemes. The acknowledgement of particularity on all fronts of the battlefield of interpretation yields a form of writing that would be unlikely to find solace in the capacity for interpretation as an epistemological procedure to position the writer on the most empowered, or immune, side of knowing. Let us say for argument's sake – though we shouldn't have to draw on too much imagination for this – that the average interpretive process is typically approached as a game where the goal is to win, in a spirit of possession fueled by the prize, some deeply internal or intrinsic current of distilled content from a text's environment – how then would a player go about cheating in his or her victory? Where in the game, which rule of the game, is the window of opportunity to cheat oneself out of a claim to the very stakes that compel one to play (if, indeed, one is compelled for reasons of one's own)? Perhaps, in being unable to resist having an end in sight prior to departing, cheating could consist in taking advantage of the other player's inherent scrupulousness. I'm speaking here of the text one has decided to play with, conceiving the confidence of its necessary (inescapable) integrity as the most luminous exposure of intention in behavior, behavior absorbing intention in the light of supreme or determinate manifestation. (A text might be full of secrets and lies, but the text itself is the truthful

showing and telling of them.) Now if the interpreter of a text need not be as exposed or fully “on the table” as the text being interpreted, having the freedom at his disposal within the game of interpretation to hide from the source of his own participation, to disassociate himself from his role, what then could ground and perhaps even measure *the rule* of his own integrity? Is there a way to play here that is not only agreeable but makes sense for players of such games when the stakes are to be found not in winning (where to win is to succeed in taking something *away* from the text) but in playing – be it “with” or “against” or “despite all odds” but ultimately *for the sheer thrill?*² I’m not saying that whatever is taken away from it does not somewhere somehow belong to it, and in belonging to it is therefore not a factor in what it’s about (and doing about what it’s about), but that the aim to do so – entering through the exit or beginning in order to end – will be a decisive factor in the restlessness of a reading in pursuit of its own justification, as if the process of interpretation were not a goal in of itself and the very mode of justification, and thus the only thing about the text that can, in the end, be taken away.

Such restlessness (by no means quick to act) seems to me to harbor the aspiration to take or strip something fundamental to the text, either within or beyond or beneath the reach of the text’s “knowledge of itself,” often in the interest of increasing the self-sufficiency of the game in which it is at play and to reinforce the means in which it can be played to produce a decisive or “final score.” Such a move, or motivation, we could say, leaves the text in the dark about the rules that come to govern the forms its meanings are permitted to take in a given institutional or intellectual community. How, then, can

² A text, in other words, has no “say” over the words we use to speak about it (although we might merely repeat what it says or speak in its voice) and thus no power of response to what is eventually printed in its name (and never just in ours).

the reader-turned-writer, who is part of a community that works for the most part in pieces (i.e. in states of separation or isolation while reading and writing), proceed to play properly, enjoy playing honestly, and on level with the text respectively, if shadowed by the strange awareness that the game looks to its players to officiate, this being in essence a game without any rules – the dangerously human game of epistemology in the humanities? The window of opportunity to cheat oneself out of playing one's part *particularly* would be to play as an official, relegated to the sidelines of one's method blowing whistles at the slightest deviation and on behalf of an alien conscience. This self-surveillance, this overprotective and interruptive self-consciousness, can result in the kind of reading that amounts to a set of results, or findings, to be submitted for approval, perhaps with the overarching aim of *securing* the approval of whomever (whatever) deigns to deliver those verdicts. We can and do cheat ourselves when we reserve our best speech (speech spoken *with* authority) for situations in which our authority as speakers is felt to precede us (speech spoken *as* authority, delivered authoritatively as the speech of rhetoric itself, delivering our own verdicts as the reward for an immaculate and proud obedience). What is lost to the sound *of* authority is nothing less than grounds *for* authority: carefully listening to the language of our speechlessness, weighing and bearing the most irrepressible uncertainty. As if the discovery of those grounds depended upon a process of elimination in detecting the source and power of our actual voice. As if the act of shedding protective layers of authority were essential in recognizing the naked ground on which we stand and from which we speak and, upon standing and speaking, hearing our voice echo and recognizing the sound as that of our very own.

If we can see the voice as the point in us where language and experience meet in a silence that is their respectful attendance to, and attenuation of, one another, then the act of writing becomes the heaviest matter of finding the words through which to plot it. Every word found in writing plots *a moment* in our responsiveness that until then, until pointing it out to ourselves, had been lost on us. Thus our words are nowhere to be found in the *decision* to write, for the voice is still not quite recognizable prior to the friction with language (where the warp of thought is subject to the flow of verbal reification). In the beginning, one is usually always bound to be at a bit of a loss for a means through which to perform this finding, to overcome the already said and transgress our memories. But it is to be remembered while resisting the seductive, stealing onslaught of the past, and the obstinacy of the realized voices that make up the very grammar of our own, that it is in finding a word after all others and put in its place that it sings in the sentence. The exact appearance of the exact word, one by one, consummates our newest tense.³ What we have it within us to say *we have*, by having it within us, first, and now, to say it. That is to take our experience as the first step in the direction of what draws us, a step we are always in partial anticipation of taking however reservedly, a step we can nevertheless trust to take outright in the “shoes” of words, which make it possible to plant our feet in our thoughts and think *through*. Without this trust in our own experience, without trusting

³ Wittgenstein apprehends this aesthetic quality of linguistic precision – “these words in these positions” – by allowing it to help account for the peculiarly intuitive and sudden grasping of the meaning of a poem. The sensible and sometimes purely affective dawning could be seen as the ripe effect of *the meaning of the necessity* of the poem’s rhythm and timbre. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Massachusetts, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001), p. 122, #531.

the right to take an interest in what has interested us, in what strikes us, showing that interest with inquiry, thus sealing it, "rote is fate."⁴

What, then, is the fate of a reader who sits in response to a text, sustaining a conversation with it, whose only language to speak it is based on the one he hears while listening to it? Listening, what becomes of a reader whose reading strives for the means, the knowledge, to (re)write it, to be able to know (to begin) how to write this complex and complexly intimate refraction? (And what depth of reading must be reached for writing to be called upon to surface from it or to reach the limits of reading?) It is the fate of someone who cannot know in advance of writing what the writing will take, someone for whom the sequence of, and the divide between, reading and writing is a fantasy. Fate, here, if secured by the opposite of rote, is released from the security of fate into *whim*. "Whim" is the word that Emerson writes on the lintel of the door to his house, an imaginary door beneath which he re-embarks upon the ship and wide open seas of his solitude; and while it is his hope that what transpires in solitude is somewhat better than whim at last he recognizes that one cannot spend the day in explanation.⁵ There is little progress to be made, psychologically or historically, in the attempt to determine why one chose to follow the fragrant winds of an intuition instead of head the train of reason, to answer for the trust showed an intuition over and above all the self-sufficient tuitions in no need of our trust anymore. Intuitions, by definition, by virtue of the hypocrisy in explaining them, are *not* to be trusted; their unaccountable and implacable nature has the power to backfire, disappoint, or lead astray, but that doesn't mean they are

⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 12.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode in collaboration with Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1981), p. 142.

untrustworthy. In fact (if the facts themselves are any guide) nothing is worthier of our trust, and nothing needs our trust more, than that which has yet to be tested.

Passing up an intuition, passing over one's experience for its rote compensations and hypothetical standardizations, is akin to closing curtains on the dawn, dismissing the dawn as nothing more than the start of an inevitable descent through the order of the day and into the closure of dusk. But the idea of beginning the day at the crack of dawn – in the crack between darkness and light where things reappear as if responsive to our reawakening – seems to require that one be able to wake up *before* it, when it's still dark, still the night, so as to usher in a new unforeseen yet dream-foresaw aspect. The implication of the temporal metaphor (that the catching of the dawn's crack calls for a chair to be pulled up and steadiest vigil kept throughout the night) is that an intuition must *in some sense* be anticipated, unexpectedly won but worked for, so as to fall into the right hands, the only pair of upturned hands, if there is to be any *means* of comprehending, in a spirit of recognition, its cryptic form of guidance.⁶

I want to explore this notion of “using oneself the way one is,” or the power contained in “what comes naturally,” because I think it offers a way inside the immanent

⁶ This image of having to “wake up” before an intuition in order for it to purposefully illuminate is, to be sure, an image – and a fate – of solitude. The person who kindles the light of his or her own solitude is necessarily unaccompanied in this task, and it is the necessity of this aloneness that limits the fruit of this labor (the labor of love for being) from satisfying the self by self-satisfaction alone. (The ivory tower's *ivory* is the very irony of compensation in this regard.) Embarking upon the ship of solitude does not guarantee that the ship will set sail, that the night will give in or silence stir, and so resigning oneself to the state of the self is not necessarily the best remedy for enduring its dark hours. But if one should nonetheless persist at port, doing whatever possible to adjust to this darkness, then perhaps it is the case that brute endurance is the only way to get the better of one's being – standing so finitely beside the one self at our infinite disposal. Call it getting the most out of our least, with solitude as the beginning of the use of oneself.

form of interpretation as the process, or behavior, of an epiphany. I pick up Stanley Cavell picking up Wittgenstein on what one might call the innate epistemology of interpretation:

[W]hat he [Wittgenstein] calls “seeing an aspect” is the form of interpretation: it is seeing something *as* something. Two conditions hold of a case in which the concept of “seeing as” is correctly employed. There must be a competing way of seeing the phenomenon in question, something else to see it as (in Wittgenstein’s most famous case, that of the Gestalt figure of the “duck-rabbit,” it may be seen as a duck or as a rabbit); and a given person may not be able to see it both ways, in which case it will not be true for him that he sees it (that is, sees a duck or sees a rabbit) *as* anything (though it will be true to say of him, if said by us who see both possibilities, that he sees it as one or the other). And one aspect dawns not just as *a* way of seeing but as a way of seeing something now, a way that eclipses some other, definite way in which one can oneself see the “same” thing.⁷

Perhaps my use of the word “behavior” with respect to the form of interpretation came across as something of a stretch, perhaps an inappropriate stretch into heartlessly behavioristic territory, but does it not also stem from the same source as Wittgenstein’s notion that when we see something *as* something our perception, coterminous with the emergent temperament of a thought, has effectively shone a light upon the rich and amorphous gloom of an ambiguity that has triggered or conditioned it? While it is difficult to know after the fact what precisely kindled the light of recognition, nor where

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 36. (Cavell’s emphases)

the light finally settles and shines in consciousness, it is not difficult to see that what we do see (that is, *when* we see it, always in a *now*) we must see: we must see whatever it is we can exclaim as a sight to behold – a sight whose successful capture or constitution is therefore fit for another’s corroboration.⁸

Now this does not mean that it is impossible for us to alter our view, to change projectors from the duck to the rabbit and back to the duck (if we have the option), but that in order to *complete* the switch a dawn must crack, an impression must strike, realities must alternate without a trace. In short, we must go blind in order to and perhaps for the sake of seeing that which has summoned the senses into the whole of a new perception, because to see something that went previously unseen, something that the rote continuity of perception passed over so as to persist, is to be blinded by what we have come to see it *as*. (This “as” blinds us to everything else *standing-by*, to all that *is* and all other ways of *as*, and thus makes possible the peculiarly assertive sense of blindness as being blinded *by* rather than *to* one’s own perception.) Which ambiguity has been precisely resolved, where precisely between thought and the world the perception can lie, and why the subject standing in the middle might wish to claim the dawning as entirely of its own doing, are questions whose answers constitute further aspects of the aspect (aspects sacrificed for the aspect dawned) caught somewhere in between the absence and invisibility of the aspect *as a whole* – as a complete structure of thought in the world. As the parts of perception they are not part of the *experience of* perception, and for that reason, according to Wittgenstein, dawning (which is an experience) is like seeing and

⁸ This sense of determinacy with respect to perception is somewhat reminiscent of the sense of *pre-articulation* that Wittgenstein perceives, and unconditionally respects, in grammar.

again not like.⁹ Through some way we can come to see and think simultaneously, without thinking strictly with our minds nor seeing solely through our eyes, and arrive at the dawning of an aspect the moment it, too, has appeared to arrive, as if from out of the dark, the blue, springing forth from the sleep of things. And a secluded epiphany envelops – honoring – the perfect coincidence of subject and object or mind and eye that could be called, in fact, the synchronization or harmonization of consciousness. This locking together of discrete modes or paths of perception (ultimately hinging on the contingency of timing) is the occasion – the germination – for those first few spasms of consciousness in which thoughts, glistening “in the flesh,” begin to hatch *before* as opposed to behind one’s eyes. I’m pushed to say in response to this that to see *like this* (unto the *this* of a this) is to be surprised (sometimes ambushed) by one’s thoughts, just as if you managed to recognize a face in a crowd seconds before the person whose face it is senses the pressure that has been put to turn in your direction and reply before saying a word.¹⁰

The picture of consciousness that this picture of interpretation stirs to mind is almost surreal: consciousness as the impossibility of complete and utter darkness *in* consciousness insofar as consciousness is the creation – the necessitation – of its own eclipses. The “light” of consciousness in this regard can be said to differentiate the continuum of light itself, cutting it up through a certain power – the invisible touch – of

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 168.

¹⁰ Although more often than we know we recognize things that we have never actually seen before, or been in contact with, because they are characteristic of what we are looking for, are examples of it. Would we then be well advised to take our surprise at the sight of something strange – or a stranger for that matter – to be the meaning of our disappointment with perfect strangeness? That we are not familiar enough or experienced enough with our own interests, or with having interests, to be pursued *by* them?

emphasis. Perhaps it is the case, then, that the moments of consciousness only *seem* mundane and uneventful as absent experiences because they are *all* (technically) epiphanies: the epistemic flood of consciousness renders a continuum of successive flashes into the most silent interpretations. But something is not quite right, or too right, too homogeneous, about this particular picture. (We are staring at a landscape, an undifferentiated vista of intense tranquility, not a soul in sight and where nothing can take our wide-open eyes by the slightest surprise.) I was moved to say, before stopping myself short, that the moments of consciousness *are* mundane and uneventful (imperceptible within experience and unaccountable as experiences), but instead wrote (wanting) “seem,” as if not bearing witness to the dawning of an aspect (keeping to the comforts of one’s post, so to speak, by not bringing one’s experience to bear) were a choice, even a strategy for maintaining (perhaps unconsciously preferring) continuity and coherence in what can only amount to an ordinary experience of our experience of the ordinary. The dullness of a dawn I can attribute only to the fact that the familiar aspect is already slated to appear like clockwork in an almost programmed hour of the day’s regimen. Too many times the radiance of this or that dawn has failed to catch hold of the hands of time the way time had seemed to stop its first time around when the aspect first struck. It’s as though we have as little power over the duration and deepening of a habitual dawning as we do over its initial triggering. But that we again missed the dawn as if half asleep throughout our rote participation in the luminous return of “the same” – the same aspect which continues to knit, so seamlessly and spectacularly, all our senses to the outside world – means that because we do not wake up to the ordinary it does not wake up to us either and therefore cannot wake us up. For that to happen we would first have to find a

way to see that we have seen something, anything, *as* something in order to better explore the conditions of “seeing-as” (circular conditions which condition the very thought that has conditioned the actual perception). And just because the form of a perception fails to provoke a reciprocal exclamation (a response which is key, in Wittgenstein, to the event of “seeing-as”) does not change the fact that the perception *has* a form *in* the form of constant *formation*, and thus retains the chance to appear unfamiliar precisely in its own light of day.¹¹

* * *

Along the way towards the self-reliance of reading, I have been passing through some hard-to-read signposts in concepts like “whim,” “intuition” and “seeing-as,” concepts that are as elusive as they are seductive as potentially (and potentially appropriately) misleading. Such concepts are like calls to danger that, depending on how we interpret them, impact lines of inquiry more by their capacity to inspire than instruct or guide, putting the onus on us to exercise our experience to the point where it can withstand not only our deepest investment but in addition, and by turns, our most rigorous antagonism. The sustaining and constant strengthening of an artistic conscience is something to strive for in our reading of texts, and is at stake especially in the rereading of them. Imagine reaching a point with respect to your own experience where it is no

¹¹ Yet I have no reason, at least no practical reason, to expect or to want to be struck by the new or the old come alive again if to be struck is to be hit hard, from beyond the specific “nowhere” of the ordinary. It is a rare occurrence – extra ordinary – for the ordinary to be the sole cause of a change in my relation to it and estimation of it, because the ordinary itself – ordinariness – is the gradual negotiation of the terms by which our experiences become conditioned agreements. What lies within the league of my everyday, however, is the freedom to acknowledge that what I might want to *call* familiar or mundane or uneventful I might yet to have deemed otherwise or even properly to have acknowledged. Thus the redemption of what we call “the ordinary” shall mark not the rebirth but, in reality, the first and only birth of it, our birth as from a post-natal womb.

longer possible for you to like a work of art without going on about how it tastes, where it is no longer possible to see a work of art *as* the work of art you experienced but rather as *your* experience of that work of art. Part of my intention in calling upon the “interpretive spark” at the center of “seeing-as” was to find a ground for indulging such a wish: that no matter how far we have to go to gain the force of deliberation over our experiences, our capacity to see one thing as another is not to mistake an identity or to project a desire but rather to work a muscle. This capacity to reach, to stretch out or make a stretch, is ours to reach *with*. But the responsibility rests solely on us to acknowledge that the way we are set up to perceive is an opportunity or opening for experience precisely because perception is an intricately precise coordination of our limitations. Limitation, at least in principle, is the root of potentiality and the germ of idiosyncrasy.¹²

¹² Giorgio Agamben, following Aristotle, shapes this reversal of fortune in the following way: “To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, *to be in relation to one’s own incapacity.*” *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 182. (Agamben’s emphasis) To have potential for a particular action over all others is to be capable first, of first acting, one’s fundamental impotentiality towards it. It is, however, certainly, tragically within everyone’s potential to repeatedly test the waters of potentiality until the deepest abyss opens below it; and what once receded away as the road to fruition, as the most natural means to the crystallization of ends, becomes not just the end in itself but of itself – the fogging up of the road – and thus of any chance to begin at the beginning. So the moral (if we care to draw one from this tiny parable) would be to jump if you’re going to jump, if that is your purpose in standing at the edge or your being. And it is well worth remembering (as long as we’re moralizing) that the longer you wait the colder the water will get for no other reason than the gradual decrease of the likelihood of you jumping, a decrease in stark proportion to the mounting clarity that the edge is as close as you were planning on getting to *the decision*. The retreat, the avoidance of defeat, the skirting of limits detrimental to any experience of success, is bitterness itself. And during the long way home, obscured by the shadows of possibility yet known too well as the back of one’s hand, no foreseeable circumstance in which you will find yourself more capable of being capable of your potential will be readily conceivable, for to have potential (as you might have guessed) is always to be potentially capable of being incapable of realizing it.

This ground zero of perception, which I am picturing as a sort of calibration of consciousness within our most basic standing-towards in the field of finitude, becomes amenable to the “jerk of whim” upon holding one’s ground in the interest of cultivating it by honoring the self as something akin to a ground worth cultivating. Abandoning a stead for whatever is next and dancing on the horizon is not to act on a whim but rather to act whimsically fatalistically. In trying to stay warm, to keep flowing one’s blood, it is the difference between building (a fire) and moving (as a fire), or between moving (to a fire) and building (a house of fire), a difference Emerson himself perceives between “the weakness of someone who stands on his head and the strength of someone who stands on his feet.”¹³ To stand on your feet, I’m inclined to say, is to know where you stand with respect to yourself no matter where you go or end up. Grounds shift, as do moods, but the feeling of standing (and hence of moving) is always the same. If such is your experience then you are less likely to travel out of a desire to follow, and even less likely to follow a desire for the sake of traveling or escaping, because you are *in the position* to stay where you are or not to.

Though it does not aid the sense of our inner orientation, nor facilitate the expressiveness of our limitations as we navigate finitude, that we are usually found the first to speak. But what does it mean to speak *first*? An aspect dawns, we see something *as* something, we have something to say, but we do not say what we have seen. What we say (when it is said so first) is something else, not quite of another matter as a digression away from *hard* matters altogether. Speaking first is therefore a bold circumvention of the natural order of perception. It is to begin with ourselves as opposed to what is in front

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” p. 164.

of us, facing us, as though the 'I' were a thing, and despite the fact that we are never in the absence of something external about which to say. The impression that we are, that we are left to a silence that is ours to fill, can occur when we use language without acknowledging, or remembering, that to do so, in order to have had cause to speak in the first place, is to have already listened *by way of language*. We can now come back to the idea of wordlessness as a response to a text because it is apparent that wordlessness is the result – beneath or within which resonates the attitude – of such an acknowledgement. Waiting for one's turn to speak is to wait until one can have *in one's hands* something to say. And for this reason I like to think of this waiting for one's turn to speak as waiting for one's speech *to turn*, almost like a tide.

Embarking upon the wait, patiently being the one not to have been the first to speak, is to be fated to the knowledge of one's wordlessness, which is an encroachment upon the terrain of one's possibilities. The trouble with finding words at a moment when we feel we need them most coincides with the sudden, sometimes jarring availability of unforeseen and hence inconceivable possibilities for new understanding and new clarities of understanding. Not to have been the first to speak is, quite simply, to have recognized what one stood to gain for oneself by remaining silent to oneself. In being the *second* to speak you are thus *spoken* to the extent that you cannot know what (no less who) you will feel the need to say (and no less become). You cannot know what you will have cause (no less caused) to say. You cannot know, upon joining up with the enterprise of your experience, what knowledge you are on the verge of coming into. (It is impossible, for instance, to know what dreams await you before falling asleep, but the inevitability of waking up to your self again, to consciousness once more, is evidence of who "the

author” was all along: *who* or *what* it was that absorbed the full measure of the day’s events regardless if they were memorable.) “One should speak only when one *may* not stay silent; and then only of that which one has *overcome*,”¹⁴ is Nietzsche’s way of saying that his decision to write is triggered, or necessitated, by the *fact* that he has been spoken (comes spoken) by an experience; that he can heed the call to speak about the realest and hardest of ideas (and in turn create as opposed to conquer new ideas) because he has sufficiently (and near thoroughly) exercised his experience of them in the historical world to the point of agility – bending to the way of the logos like Socrates.¹⁵

So one may not be anything *but* silent when trying to hear (so as to have) the thoughts of a response. To be sure, the thoughts of our responses can be none other than our own, though it is worth stressing that this seal of possession or entitlement is not necessarily stamped or legibly signed.¹⁶ This is due to the fact that, on the one hand, it is

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 209. (Mine and Nietzsche’s emphasis)

¹⁵ The near perfect physical condition of the dancer is fundamental to the elastic articulacy and precision swiftness by which Nietzsche’s aphorisms thrive on an entropy of philosophical speculation. Pitched in between one self-contained organism of thought and the next as if balanced on a tightrope, I imagine the dancer in Nietzsche summoning the optimal coordination of focus, composure and calm before launching himself into a head-on trajectory of activity, patiently awaiting the moment when he will be quite physically incapable of waiting any longer, when his turn to speak finally comes through the most natural breaking of silence by way of insight, turning his dancing body toward the next (and never the nearest) necessity of thought. Evidence that one speaks *with* experience is losing, in all fairness, the struggle to hold one’s tongue after holding one’s breath all the way to the bottom of the depths. The best storytellers not only wait until their part in the story is completely done to open their mouths, but dare not open them at all unless the story is felt to be in danger of being completely forgotten, for only then is the teller fit (right) to pass it on.

¹⁶ Any thought which is formed in isolation from experience – as a frame for it or as a bridge to pass it – and whose root is untraceable outside of language, is the sort of thought I deem foreign to experience insofar as it fails to come into contact with it (due perhaps to a lack of any relevant resemblance to it). In missing or avoiding the entrance

never really up to us to be faced with brute experience and, on the other, that it is rarely within our power to avoid missing most of the time much of what is obvious in it. (The freedom to turn *away* from our experience and the feeling of there being nothing to turn away *from*, or nowhere to turn, are respective indications of both.) However, it is our decision, or fully up to us, to face what faces us – to turn *back*. This interjection of consciousness calls for a conscientious assertion of will, and one of *good will* with respect to encounters whose extreme complexity tempts the will to extreme reduction. What I am calling a “conscientious exertion” is put in the service of experiencing our experiences in such a way as to have them as responses, but not to hold as we would a possession as *to be held* – in a spasm of understanding – by what we have come *at last* to notice. The noticing is tardy, but never untimely, and a relief of sorts upon its arrival: a life is never without a chance to move on. But in the event that we have allowed our thoughts to speak first by giving ourselves first say (speaking before and therefore in the absence of the object of attention’s ripe singularity), then to a certain extent we have altogether cut in front of the object’s “say” (slogan of specificity, so to speak). Now, in light of the fact that texts are notorious for having *too much* to say, what, if anything, can a choice (i.e. chosen) text say in the event that we have spoken for it? My sense is that it can say whatever we might want it or require it or force it to show. A text, in this way, is made to answer a question that may or may not resemble or bear upon the question(s) which motivate it, and is thus made to answer *for* an invisible meta-text of assumptions, restrictions and underlying desires “written” in the shift from reading to writing by a

to experience, as it were, such “thoughts” can miss or avoid the chance to be checked and if need be revised: missed opportunities as long as thought has a role to play in solving problems or understanding situations or negotiating relations, and not just collaborating and conflicting and ultimately “bouncing off” other thoughts.

reader-turned-writer and to which the concept of methodology is often loosely connected and eagerly glossed. Texts, like objects, though far from innocent, do not resist being spoken for, or, if they do, resist passively and in silence.

If a text does put up a fight against reader ventriloquism – defending its rights, claiming its knowledge, inciting the potential for new knowledge – then it is only out of our deepest respect for what a text can do to the act of reading and, by inescapable extension, to us who read it:

[I]t is the text that draws us out of our knowledge into the pursuit of a knowledge beyond us. A knowledge we are drawn to, which is beyond ourselves but nevertheless pertains to us, can be construed as a knowledge of our possibilities.¹⁷

For the reader ready to be “spoken by” the reading of a text (whose turn to writing is bound to heed instead of spur the call of writing), the shift implied by Gould from what a text means to what a text knows, or from what it *contains for any reader* to what it *communicates to a particular reader*, also marks a significant shift towards a specifically reader-oriented (or performative) directive for what I then (and only then) would want to call an “ethics of interpretation.”¹⁸ The shift is a precarious one (warranting some

¹⁷ Timothy Gould, *Hearing Things: Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 194.

¹⁸ In the lengthy and sprawling introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell’s first book of film readings, a preliminary link between performance and ethics is pursued through the more explicit example of the necessity of musical interpretation: “A performance of a piece of music is an interpretation of it, the manifestation of one way of hearing it, and it arises (if it is serious) from a process of analysis. (This will no longer be the case where a piece just *is* its performance; where, say, it is itself a process of improvisation.) Say that my readings, my secondary texts, arise from processes of analysis. Then I would like to say that what I am doing in reading a film is performing it (if you wish, performing it inside myself). (I welcome here the sense in the idea of performance that it is the meeting

suspicion) and comes close to demanding a flat-out reversal of the routine directionality of interpretation as opposed to a mere shift in emphasis. Suspicious, we might want to ask what kind of interpretive ethics could justify putting the priorities of the text itself *after* the possibilities generated through its experience? The text-to-reader reversal (where the reading of a text finishes not at the end of the text but at the end of the reading) would seem to contradict the essential activity of reading as an unbridled affirmation of textual possibilities were it not the case that in order to reach this point of reversal (where the text flowers with the pertinence of *our* possibilities) the unbridled affirmation must have reached, or nearly reached, its apotheosis in the form of an acknowledgement expressed through analysis. And the only way this apotheosis can be reached, it seems to me, is on the momentum of the excitement of being interested by it and therefore in it, and therefore (almost invariably) in one's interest in it. But to demonstrate that investment by positioning yourself "ethically" with respect to the text's or its author's "rights" is to be preoccupied with the baggage of a principle, with the performance of an etiquette (i.e. reciprocating the gift), which can cause us to lose sight of something significant (and perhaps significantly ethical) that is potentially at stake: the creation of another text that renews the gift that was given by harboring the same power to create *in its turn* future texts. A text on a specific text that is about what that text "means" means (perhaps tacitly) to be the final word on it within the context of a given approach to reading it and vocabulary for writing it; whereas a text that is about what a text "knows" is knowable as such only as part of the knowledge generated by it and can

of a responsibility.) This leaves open to investigation what the relations are between performance and interpretation, and between both of these and analysis, and between differing analyses, and hence between differing performances."(37-38)

mean, as a result, only the full meaning of its own fold of words (unto the voice of the wording) – thoughts which amount to nothing less than the knowledge of the interpreter’s possibilities within a text made fully possible to itself through the analysis of reading. The new text is then found in a position to inspire rather than instruct a way into the “originary” or prior text for the simple reason that it does not claim to know what caused it to become a fully fledged text and not just a dependent reading insofar as it will not claim what it knows as absolute knowledge of its object even if its claims are found to hold for it. Which ultimately goes to *show* that there will never be a permanent way out of a prior text upon finding one’s own way in or in discovering that the only way *in* is by writing one’s way “out.”¹⁹

There is something uninspiring about inspiration that can strike us as reassuring here. Inspiration is governed by the same rule instruction aspires to instill: there is no such thing as a perfectly original thought. Every inspiration gets ignited with something borrowed, but unless it proceeds with the conviction that *in these hands* it can be bettered it is not inspiration but seduction. Handled any other way the inspiration is but stored for safe keeping, perhaps in the form of instructions for how to avoid letting go of them by being inspired by them. The practice of self-reliance, in light of this genealogical perspective on inspiration, becomes one of appropriation or passage that is the exercise,

¹⁹ So it is that the texts we care most deeply about, holding the most importance and relevance for our own lives, resonating throughout the duration of our lives, are not unlike places to which we can and often do claim a certain spiritual residency. We tend to return to them, in parts or as a whole, and with the frequency of a regular visitor – breaking with obligations regardless of how pressing – for yet another pleasantly unpredictable and revitalizing conversation in our *meantime*: a space where time flies by like nowhere else, as if absent in the purest realm of the child’s imagination, or stops as a result of the imagination at work.

in Cavell's terms, not of power but reception.²⁰ The self is herein proposed (and in an unsettling sense warged) as the embodiment of the potential of its capacity (responsibility?) to make something out of itself, out of the foreign materials (call them voices) responsible for forming it, thus finding its *cause* – plight of purpose – in the complex of effects whose causes they eclipse. (“Our task is and remains above all not to mistake ourselves for others.”²¹) But there's always a standing formula for thought ready and waiting to take over thinking for ourselves: the silent authority of precedence, precursors and the indefatigable dead can steal our say by subsuming, even impersonating our voice, governing from the inside our methods of beginning, filling them up with so much thought such that what ends up said can have little to no sound, having passed through barely any space, as it were. Conformity (mistaking ourselves for others) coincides with the assumption that only established ideas and precursors (what are often called the original and originating ones), and not our encounters and conflicts with them, can bring about purposeful knowledge; and that the voicing of that knowledge – the particular path one took to understand what has already been understood – is not in some sense vital to the existing sense of it, which is perhaps also what we intuitively take any knowledge to count on: *perspicacity*. I think the basis of this intuition that knowledge counts on the lucidity of its sense (hard won and free of anxiety) in order to resonate as (not like) knowledge is the same as the intuition which leads us to take the same criterion

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), p. 135.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 345. For Harold Bloom, the task of the poet is similar: not to succumb to the anxiety of his or her influences by proceeding to alleviate that anxiety with acknowledgements of authority that do nothing but confer authority. For live instances in which the “weaker” poets make poetry out of debt to the “stronger” ones, see his book *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1973).

– perspicacity – to hold for the seal of our liberation as thinking feeling dreaming beings: not to be ashamed in front of ourselves. You are free (to be free) when you have learned (hence earned) to speak your own voice in front of yourself without stuttering on account of shame or repressing that stutter with preachy all-knowingness by the same account. But stuttering and preaching out of shame for sounding the way we do (the awkwardly tuned instruments that we are) seems exactly the kind of lesson we enforce upon ourselves in the former case, and therefore inevitably upon each other in the latter case, within the various institutions to which the facilitation and circulation and posterity of our discourse is ultimately entrusted. Since “becoming the person you are” by “taking your person into your own hands” is generally regarded, at least in public, as bad (undisciplined) methodology, eventually coming to regard yourself as the slate for the image of a profession, and then as a vehicle for the task of professionalization, suggests the workings of an implicit and self-sustaining ideological pressure, or methodological pressuring, by which an institution fosters in a given member (particularly within aspiring members) near causal associations between independence and withdrawal, self-affirmation and self-indulgence, and gaps in knowledge with the lack of experience.

I wish to stress, for it is an aspect easily lost, that to insist on self-reliance in the act of interpreting a text is not an occasion to insist on the self of the reader-turned-writer. Such an interpretation of self-reliance as the enforcing of oneself *to* oneself is a misunderstanding of the potential for self-reliance to avail the self to new, perhaps contradictory meanings – a foreign knowledge of possibilities activated by the rigor of reading’s wildest abandon. The nagging feeling of being confronted and judged and somehow defeated by the immaculate, immutable and undoubtedly mythical image of the

person of the author one is reading betrays a desperate insecurity in the face of the risk of reading, threatening not just the possibility of reading but also the very reality of reading, the very experience of an encroachment into the exotic, mysterious and forbidden-feeling terrain of point-of-no-return renewal. For a critic like Maurice Blanchot, so committed to precision self-effacement in the face of a text, it is ultimately “the reader’s reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads, someone who knows in general how to read,”²² that leaves him stranded with nowhere to go, after demonstrating his capacity to finish a book, except back to the shelf for the next one.²³ The reader’s reluctance to receive the gift of reading as the ennobling of dependency into the highest form of concentration, however, might be an indication of a premature (or aversive) attack on conformity. Self-reliance (mis)construed as the necessity of looking to the self for the source or key to a fixed identity (by means of which an existence is inscribed) is fueled by the desire (worse than the error) to conform to the self. The stand against conformity ironically backfires here with perhaps its most extreme and irreversible consolidation in the form of a self that is itself only on

²² Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 198.

²³ A little bit before making this critical remark, Blanchot expresses the workings of a terrible ambivalence plaguing the very ambition and hope of reading: “There is in reading, at least at reading’s point of departure, something vertiginous that resembles the movement by which, going against reason, we want to open onto life eyes already closed. This movement is linked to desire which, like inspiration, is a leap, an infinite leap: I want to *read* what is, however, not written.”(195, Blanchot’s emphasis) As unthinkable as it sounds to open onto life eyes already closed while preparing to stare at page after page of writing, perhaps there is something to be said for the way in which desire and fear at the threshold of reading can produce, on the one hand, an excitement and, on the other, cancel out into disinterest or even repulsion, blinding one to the book as such. Perhaps it is always the *next* book that we wish we could be reading *while* reading, for it is the next book which is the only “book” that could support the wish for a book, at last, to read to us itself on behalf of all books.

the condition that it remains other to all others by performing all its differences. The kind of self-reliance I'm encouraging, on the other hand, ends with the opposite of a head-rush of empowerment that crowns with a sense of mastery so brutal when placed at the helm of a method. I see it less as an objectification of consciousness than as a *symptom* of total, reckless, indeterminable receptivity to the point of losing your guard, and any hope of timing your protection, before the object of contemplation or wonder.²⁴

For the poet John Keats, there is nothing paradoxical (at least nothing incoherently paradoxical) about a self-reliance that has *absolutely* no self to rely on:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member . . .): it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body – The Sun, the Moon, the Sea, and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute – the poet has none; no identity – he is

²⁴ Unlike self-reliance as self-mastery, this shiny albeit darker (certainly the other) side of self-reliance could never become a method anyone could honestly or even logically espouse as a method worth adopting. It would not be safe, and thus far from sound, to advise someone that they are not, that is, under no *given* circumstance, who they think they are, particularly if that person is not accustomed to or concerned with thinking about the meaning and consequences of their thoughts of themselves.

certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature – how can it, when I have no nature?²⁵

When self-reliance, continually and uncompromisingly turned to and trusted, devolves over time into the stage of affliction (the sickness of being hyper-permeable, as porous in the mind as in the body, or the sickness of always getting sick), the self relied alters temperaments from a show of confidence, or perhaps even one of vanity, to a vitally irremediable crisis of identity. “*Vitally irremediable crisis*”: does such a phrase, we might wonder, pit us against a contradiction or sentence us to a paradox? In general, paradoxes have an implosive semantic effect whereas contradictions bear an explosive consequence to their illogic. The former, being potentially or secretly dialectical, are constructive when they come out true; the latter, being quite impotent as nullifications, are destructive insofar as there is no meaning left over (or not enough of it) in which to qualify for evaluations of truth and falsity and common sense. So when Keats writes in a letter that he has no self but is still (possibly, probably) a poet, is he canceling himself (putting himself as a poet into crisis) or creating himself (elevating his self to the crisis of the poet) when he goes on to ask – as if forced to take the last step of an unstoppable argument – where the wonder is that he should say he would never write again?

²⁵ John Keats, “The Letters of John Keats,” in *English Romantic Writers* (second edition), ed. David Perkins (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1967), p. 1286.

Let us break down the internal dialogue Keats has with himself about himself as a poet before proceeding to answer to the confessional and rhetorical aspects of his concluding couple of questions: ‘*He*, Keats the poet, has no self, but *I*, Keats, am one of these poets. Ergo, the poet is not *who* I am. But if the *part* of me by which I measure the *whole* of myself and therefore wish to *call* myself is, in the end, not who I *am*, then I must be no *one*. And if that is true that I am not one then I must therefore *be too many*: How else could my nature be so wretchedly unpoetical?’ The conclusion reached is that poets are unpoetical because to be a poet is to strive to think about something apart from the self to such a point *in the thing* that whatever is thought is ensconced *in its terms*. Keats describes this reversal as “filling some other body.” Though it might be more accurate to say, insofar as it completes the reversal of thought, that the “thought” of some other body fills the poet upon discovering that his speculations while thinking poetically about something (anything) in particular will cease only when they have “spilled over” into the act of writing poetry. Such is a self that creates, as it were, with the created (or writes with the already written, with, say, the impulsive signatures of the world). Now if Keats means that having a self that can create is the meaning of being self created (in the sense of not being unchangeable to himself), but can only come at the expense of what he calls poetical identity, what then is left for him – Keats – to create *with*? What, he unwillingly speculates, is left *of his self* – *what self*? – with which to create? If the premises add up and the conclusion rings true, where would lie the point of our wonder if he should declare that he, the most unpoetical, will write no more poetry under the name “John Keats” or any name which takes “him” for granted?

It is there to see that any answer to Keats's questions is bound to be no less paradoxical and multiple than the roots of the questions themselves. As deeply earnest as they are, they are also rhetorical and, paradoxically in this case, no less earnest for that. The importance of the questions for tracking the conditions, strategies and consequences of self-reliance will turn out to hinge, I believe, on just this quality of indeterminacy – just this characteristic crisis – with respect to our identity. We cannot know the answer to the question of our identity in part because there is no answer, or set of answers, or even a set of questions, that could permanently alleviate skepticism over the accuracy and applicability of the concept of “identity” to that of the “self,” doubts over the existence of agreeable and sharable criteria for the non-contingent characterization of a self-concept (to say nothing of doubts regarding self-knowledge as the appropriate moral base for such criteria). At the very least we would want to add or subtract from the list of characteristics, or rewrite it or tear it up or switch mediums, the second we sent it to be published. That is the awkward moment in which we can suddenly find ourselves out of our own hands despite an interminable condemnation to holding our being, to being the ones who cannot let go of it short of losing not just all we have but all we are – *that we are*. This contradictory form of self-consciousness has the power to both sterilize our relationship to ourselves and cut into our conscience. But Keats's insight or confession (the two words strike me here as sharing the same spirit) is that to be the incessant holders of our own hands is to be in relation to our “selves” only in relation to other bodies, which all lead back to a (sense of) self whose identity must hinge (or claw) on the contingency of its relations for being split at its core or for simply lacking a core altogether. This is no longer to hold but to *be held* by whatever foreign body (i.e. an

object standing in perfect reference to its nature) the self aspires to become temporarily subordinate, for in being their one and only holder – our hands – is to be capable (responsible?) of holding our palms wide open. (To be against being the official holder of our own hands would be to use them for the purpose of keeping them fisted closed to anything – and potentially everything – that might threaten to pry ourselves – our false sense of self – out of them.) Now, the consequences of this condition in which you are lead by yourself to the brink of change (the vitally irremediable crisis) is that the self ceases to exist as some thing you can hold onto at the precise moment when it is relied upon most fully. “There is no such *thing*,” Wittgenstein says, confessing too, “as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas.”²⁶

My persistent use of the verb “to hold” in relation to the metaphor of “our hands” is meant not to loosen the grip of consciousness on the world as our grip on consciousness itself in order to capture the sense of being in the hold of something powerful, or beheld by something overpowering. Depending on the tightness and relentlessness of the grip we might need to substitute a word like “possession,” which could then come to stand for being overwhelmed to the point of being *overcome*. The point, however, is that when we find ourselves grabbed by something as powerful as a work of art that has worked so well on us we are not, I’m suggesting, anymore properly *our* self, which is to say that we can no longer stand properly *as* a self, as if being ourselves were a matter of standing up straight. We behave significantly differently, differently significantly, behave the behavior of the text perhaps, or cease to behave

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 69, #5.631. (My emphasis)

reliably, perhaps not knowing how to behave, how to respond, in accordance with our most developed habits. There is no telling how we will finally respond (I want to say resound) should we decide to write about it, that is, to write our reading – this fortuitous integration with the otherness of a text. I like to think of this act of writing our reading, working through our reading with writing, as a rare opportunity for *misbehaving*. But the sense of misbehavior I'm after is not entirely one of transgression. I do not mean for it to promote the sorts of interpretive behaviors that transgress the structure and character of texts to the ends of the performative. Rather, the angle can be found, I believe, in the need to transgress, say, the text of oneself: not to misbehave as a writer as *miss one's own behaviors* of writing (which is tantamount to missing behaviors of thinking in the sense of both escaping and lacking one's "old ways"). This is the connection I was trying to make between the possibility for behaving differently, for differently behaving towards one's possibilities, and a temporary loss of posture (as opposed to an overly decisive, and perhaps aggressive, change in attitude): You suddenly find yourself dissatisfied with the familiar tendencies and overall drift of your thought, and begin to experience those shapes and patterns as the unchecked habits and rituals and quiet comforts that they are, when taking it upon yourself to put into words what has spoken to you and through you and thanks to the poet in you.

* * *

In his "More of *The World Viewed*," admitting to the charge of having made a difficult and sometimes incomprehensible book on the ontology of film, Cavell recounts how he found himself wanting to write not his "usual" thoughts, that is, not the thoughts he is accustomed to formulating on occasions in which clarity or cleanliness of

expression is both implicitly called for and reciprocally called upon as the highest priority, but rather the thoughts of his most intimate and tangled *responses* to the “thought” of film:

[I]n writing about film I felt called upon to voice my responses with their privacy, their argumentativeness, even their intellectual perverseness, on their face; often to avoid voicing a thought awaiting its voice, to refuse that thought, to break into the thought, as if our standing responses to film are themselves standing between us and the responses that film is made to elicit and to satisfy.²⁷

Something about film (let’s call it its poetical character) issued out of Cavell’s sustained responsiveness (to particular films and the particularity of film in general) a type of response that can no longer be called (that is, with any justice) *just* a response. The response is characterized, paradoxically and near negligibly, as that which stands in between him and the responses he expects to have while watching, remembering or contemplating film. Cavell calls this response (curiously, perhaps, while sitting) a “standing response.”²⁸ By that I take him to mean that as a response – intuitive, spontaneous, urgent, protective – it is strong enough to stand in his place, and if it can

²⁷ Stanley Cavell, “More of *The World Viewed*,” in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 163.

²⁸ Although it best be remembered that Cavell does not place this concept in quotations and in leaving it bare (or to stand) does not merely call it by its name but instead by what it is – *a response*. But since I have not emerged from a position of subordination to the ontology of an object, have not been filled by that which I hold (for I do not hold it here), and thus can’t make the same claim about my own experiences with film lest I drop the self-conscious or meta-critical theme of experience altogether, I feel I must take him *at* his word and proceed by way of the meanings suggested by it: the response that stands “in between,” “in the way,” “behind,” “against” . . .

stand in his place without reservation or regret, despite the risks that come with thinking outside the terrain of one's thought, then it must be able to stand on his behalf, which would require that it also be fit to *withstand* his behalf, to withstand the potential for the most rigorous checking via the obstinate shadowing of his own thinking presence – and all the clerical customs to which his thought, in all its forms, remains unconditionally committed – standing tall and presiding over (and over-determining) its responses. In other words and in the end, the standing response, however much his own, and however much in response to film, requires *its own* response – a *second* response or set of responses to stand up to it so as to be in the best position to read the (full) measure it has taken. It is from this point directly outside his self, a point of pure view – unscathed and experiential, experientially unscathed – that is the *intimate remove* with and from the intractable captivation of film, where Cavell's writing gets underway. (“Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?”)²⁹ This phenomenon is an event with the

²⁹ Cavell holds the entire speculative enterprise of *The World Viewed* beneath the epigrammatic banner of this question from Thoreau's *Walden*. If the book as a whole can be said to offer an answer, it is only by way of pointing us in the direction of the layered encryption within this idea and image of “a world viewed” that Cavell casts as the master key to the nature of film (opening, if you like, a secret passage into nature itself). This metaphorical concept – a temporal as much as a spatial inversion, both outcomes of the grammatical inversion – raises Thoreau's question in a new light (precisely film's) by referring to the unique capacity for moving images to restate the fact of the world's existence without the facts of our world – objects and their beholders and “the world” as a fact of language – to back it up or bolt it down. Thoreau's question, when put to viewers of the screen, is thus in a position to provoke an answer within the logical yet faith-filled leap necessary to transcend the perception of objects as they appear in a false light unto a credulous sense of the world as a whole, spreading beyond the limits of its present beholding while reaching back to the past once held. Moreover, the act of experiencing a film as the whole it constructs, fundamentally reducible to it on the one hand but also fundamentally separate from it (piece by piece) on the other, requires that we exercise the same power of belief (logically faithful) as when the existence of what is present before us in the world manifests as the right kind and amount of evidence of the world's existence independently of our own, especially when that existence is capable of

power to call up the field of writing, calling upon the figure of the writer to rise up from the depths of what he or she has undertaken to read, to stand up into the standing response and give bodily meaning to the name “understand.”

In the event that one is called upon by one’s reading to write it, the idea, as Cavell sees it, is to avoid writing *through* the response as though it were a window, as if the object of it were something entirely separable and therefore clearly visible past the lucid opacity of its subject.³⁰ At first glance, the alternative to writing right through your standing responses (to film, or whatever provokes responses which appear unaccountable or untraceable or irreconcilable to their actual cause) would seem to be to write *with* them, letting them speak on your behalf (perhaps as the speech of your better half), which is to start your own speaking from the center of that conversation as an interlocutor. I think that for Cavell this means thinking a type of thought that one is not in the habit of thinking, or a language of thought whose speaking is achieved only by the adventure of writing, to the extent that one has yet to be able to have, and to know where to find, and

being put in doubt by being on our own – by the shadows of our consciousness of it. But since we cannot help flex this power – pulse with this faith – in our forward acknowledgement of the world thus lived, it becomes the gift of film that we are delivered, sometimes driven to recall that what we experience at any moment is but a way of the world and side of ourselves, that what is beyond our reach is within someone else’s, that the muscle, as it were, stays flexed – fundamentally inflexible faith – even as we sit back to the world whose partial and piecemeal and altogether incomplete existence onscreen *only seems* to deny our existence to it (and to others equally denied). Seeming, here, especially here, is believing: moving images, existing both near and far from the truth of their own reference, stand far from one truth but close to another.

³⁰ The transparency of the standing response would be of the same degree of falsity and order of fallaciousness as the transparency of the film it has felt. And yet the illusion, the fantasy, the temptation, of transparency – so commensurate with and indistinguishable from the figure of objectivity – is, at the same time, part of film’s power to ambush, disorient and sometimes pervert the self-imposed etiquette of even the most strategically regimented and detached type of thinker by cutting straight through the responses of reason.

how to strike, to sound, particular thoughts with particular words. The thoughts that we've already had before tempt us into taking them for granted, to trusting them without another word from us, but not on the grounds of their actual aptness and appropriateness. On the contrary, the old thoughts come back, as stern and sharp as our most engraved memories, complete with instructions for the voicing of them (the commemoration of them), seeming and then merely sounding apt and appropriate. The ensconcing timbre of the cliché resonates, against the background of our every better judgment, as the harmonious ring of that which has been mastered by rote. The thought, in other words, stemming from Cavell's words, awaits its familiar voice, its finishing touch, the levity by which it can preside as a personal law, and receives it as soon as the habit of having it has been permitted to follow through on its tendency to repeat itself unconditionally. In the interest of breaking these habits of thought Cavell suggests that refusing them is not enough. What he calls for in order to break them (for the sake of pursuing the heart of what has interested him) is a breaking not *of* thought but *into* thought, as if the only way to break habits of thought is to escape into our thoughts *as they come* by throwing ourselves unhesitatingly upon them. (This is also the surest way of finding out what, if anything, they are made of.) The inherent risk, however, in conceding to think such thoughts – thoughts which not only constitute but simultaneously rend the dense fabric of *The World Viewed's* “foreign rigor”³¹ – is that you can never be entirely sure about your

³¹ This is a phrase occasionally deployed by Cavell in his struggles to account for what he takes to be the groundless and ultimately ungracious neglect of Emerson as Philosopher. See *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). My use of it with respect to the complexly clarified mystifications of *The World Viewed's* reflections on film is meant to acknowledge a similar struggle against the groundless dismissal and ungracious under-appreciation of this equally grounding and generous text by the field that stands to benefit from it most.

meaning at the level of your intention, for a “certain obscurity of prompting”³² will not have been external to what you wished most fervently to say.

The experience of being obscurely prompted by an artistic work or medium or aspects thereof (or whatever you chance to see standing before you and staring back) carries within it the romance, potentially urgent, of a private investigation. Why were you so suddenly *stopped*? What is the meaning of what caused you to *look up*, when and the way you did? What are the consequences, the stakes, should you decide to pursue the source of what struck you? In permitting the seriousness of such questions to spur, and afterwards haunt, his own interpretive investigations, Cavell’s method strikes me as *internally* (as opposed to theoretically) psychoanalytic. And in full deference to an obscurity of prompting equal to Emerson’s conviction in “whim” (which, we might

At the same time, it is important to qualify this struggle (as Cavell does in about as many essays on Emerson as penned by Emerson and as scrupulously) as standing in almost perfect proportion to those presented (and never entirely explained) by this text’s foreign rigor. The not unnecessary and timely gesture of explanation, justification and contextualization is the cue for Cavell to become his own ambitious reader in “More of *The World Viewed*,” a long essay published as the second part of the enlarged edition, which he opens quite appropriately (and familiarly) with an acknowledgement of his critics before proceeding to respond to them as to criticisms all his own: “I have been told, and by friends sympathetic to the issues of *The World Viewed* and patient with the difficulty of their expression, that I have made a difficult book, a sometimes incomprehensible book.”(162) The piece plays out as a test of both the external and internal criticism and skepticism to which Cavell may or may not be forced to align himself against his will “to believe in the book.”(162) *The World Viewed*’s passing of the test is thus determined by the successes *and* failures that come with answering to *all* the questions and concerns formed in response to it, with no one question or concern judged to be more or less representative of the question of its significance than any other, leaving the final score square in the hands of Cavell’s sincerity as an interpreter of his own writing, his capacity and commitment to see-through his acknowledgement of the criticism, and the strength of his intellectual conscience to not only recognize but be *convinced* by the keenest criticisms without betraying the logic of belief in the obscurity that prompted him to respond to film in the first place with something analogously (though nowhere near equally) obscure.

³² Ibid. And for Cavell no obscurity is as self-evident, thus full of prompt, as a world from which we are absent.

recall, he goes so far as to inscribe above his methodological door), Cavell remarks that in the event of a natural provocation (where a dark contingency turns fragrantly, hence near imperceptibly diurnal) it is mystically evident that “Something has happened; it is up to us to name it, or not to. Something is wrestling for our blessing.”³³ Hypotheses regarding the thing that has happened (the coinciding of the thing with the consciousness of its happening) would have to pertain as much to the potential for it to ripen in our hold – dependent as much on our potential to be sufficiently patient with ourselves – as to the circumstances and eventfulness of the thing itself. It is then not just the eventful object which stands marked as a question but that *in the light of it* we are found standing, wondering, needing an answer to the meaning of our coming to attention. This heightened sense of being on the verge of being *found out* by the spurs of thought, of becoming rooted in the field of our most present point or step in the time and space of our interior lives, is perfectly (and paradoxically) coincident with the discovery of the means to *move on*, in thought and through life, across the space and time of oneself, *onward*, away from this step here (now a foothold) towards the one slightly above, or below, slightly off – the same sort of landing which eluded us before when we got up off our feet so as to move. The “next step,” because it is *next*, because we can merely glimpse the lip of it, is what wrestles for our blessing to receive us, as it were, in the best of health but poorest of shape. Upon giving our blessing, and in anticipation of the paralyzing swell of anxiety, the condition is that the entire step must be taken before there can be any assurance that all of it is in fact *there* to be taken, short of which we are fated to spend our lives in a kind of rote ambivalence towards to the future of our potential. The

³³ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition*, p. 137.

blessing, assuming we know how to give it, that is, how to become vulnerable and amenable to the knowledge of our most irreducibly resonant experiences, is given in the name of that which has succeeded to stop thought from moving in circles around the unthinkable, thoughtlessly and selflessly (as if the self were being driven or dragged around by itself). The self seems to be one if not the last candidate, so to speak, to which we can safely entrust the fate of our future that it be approachable. This is so, I think, because the self cannot be trusted to know what has meaning for it without being somehow and very suddenly reminded, with or without the help of names, what has happened to it, even if it has been irrevocably altered by what it has undergone. To come to some definite and definitive understanding of what we think, feel or believe, or know, the self to which we “consult” – the self to whom we ask about ourselves – is confined to the awkward position of having to consult itself, to ask itself what, truly, it thinks, feels, believes, knows, only to provide knowledge in the form of claims *about* itself. And since we end up forgetting, effortlessly and without harm, what we log in our memory, the self, in order to reclaim its past in the name of our present, must find a way to make a “sense” out of memory, out of the past, so that the blessing of a reminder need not depend upon – or worse result in – a self wrestled to the ground, thrown to its knees or altogether bowled over by the same thing happening *again* as if for the first time, as if the most personal past could pass for the most unpredictable and promising future.

It is from such an idea of *not being in possession of our knowledge* or, in possessing it, ceasing to know how to acknowledge it (appreciating what we have but could never truly own) that the event of being stopped by a sense of immanent possibility emanating from the reading of a text can be seen to function with – to the point of being

the function of – the force of recollection. Thus Emerson can claim that “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.”³⁴ The recognition, perhaps, bubbles up to our consciousness as from under the rocks of repression, returning beautifully foreign and gift-like. One could also say that the discarded memory returns as a thought we can finally have in front of us, see and touch as it were without thinking, a thought we have finally learned through experience *how to experience*, that is, for ourselves, and in the process take back forever what was never ours to begin with. (When we were able to have forgotten it we had no choice, in retrospect, but to reject the form that it took as fundamentally incompatible with a certain *way* of looking at things that privileged – without necessarily knowing why – the *one way*.) When stopped by “something” the cause of which is virtually irreconcilable with its actual or intended effect in the text itself, where such an event is seen to stand somewhere “outside” the text’s boundaries as if it has yet to be accounted for or taken responsibility for by the text from whence it came, a different register of explanation (inextricably tied, of course, to the angle of the interpretation) is required to comprehend the uncanny feeling of something familiar come back *unfamiliar*. The important point here is that this unfamiliar form does not contain the key to its own uncanny familiarity, it is not equipped to reveal to us why it seems (and is) so familiar for us: it is not in the jurisdiction of a text, after all, to single-handedly reopen the case of a particular possibility of its readers. To this end such uncanniness it is at most a clue, but to be in the hold of such a clue is like holding a key to understanding something about

³⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” p. 139. Wittgenstein seems to claim as much for the archeological labor of what has managed to be called (ignorantly) or to call itself (naively) “genius”: “The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.” *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 43, #127.

ourselves that we have always, as it turns out, *merely* known, or perhaps, until now, misunderstood (which is probably why we could never properly articulate it or, just the same, could only speculate about its existence). The clue, or clues, is a cause (or steps) to carry out a motion, to *move*, to move *on*, to move on *back*, and find words for what we are finding out about our own possibilities within a text that has made it possible to put a stop, at last, to “*us*.”³⁵

³⁵ This reference (and others like it) to the state of the subject (temporarily suspended by the reader-turned-writer) is awfully broad. Left as it is, it would appear to level all the variations, both subtle and pronounced, of an entire continuum of forms, roles, positions and paradigms assumed by human consciousness in the history of philosophy at least since Descartes. The mold of consciousness (or the picture of the subject) that I’ve been appropriating throughout my discussion of readers and writers and interpreters is, I must admit, somewhat formless and raw, or perhaps too introspected or underexposed, particularly when faced with its own history to which it is bound, like everything, to answer for (lest its silence on the stand of history be accused of concealing its own motives within history). But suppose I were to answer for it now by proceeding to trace the origin of this picture of consciousness to which I am drawn, not forgetting to account for the logic of its extremely precise position within a history that encircles it. Suppose I had said or tried to say, somewhere near the beginning, what “I” or “us” or “self” *says* or *can* say in the hands and mouths of the writers and speakers of our time who, depending on their chosen profession (complete in each case with concrete presentiments of both angle and audience), operate in relation to readymade images of themselves in their work. Suppose one could actually characterize the contents of a given conception of consciousness in accordance with a conception of consciousness in general as fundamentally (or perhaps phenomenologically) genealogical – layering the philosophies of Descartes upon Kant upon Nietzsche upon Husserl upon Bergson and Deleuze and onward – I would nevertheless still want to know how to reconcile the experience of myself (to myself) in the world with so many bodies of knowledge concerning “the self” (the same self, as far as I can tell, to which “I” (me) am *subject*), including all their convenient conceptual distillations like “consciousness” or “subjectivity” or “experience” or “knowledge” or “morality” at our disposal today to frame and measure and potentially risk isolating ourselves. “Us,” though more of a tool-like referent than an organic-like concept, is no less a mode of image (particularly when italicized), a mode through which “the one *as* one” pictures “the many *as too* many,” a mode with the power to picture ourselves as we *are* – as such, as it were, in the absence of the other – to *each* (and every) *other*, and as having our being still in common despite all distance and difference. But as an image (left as it is) it is invariably quite static and rather disappointingly opaque. In the end, it gathers everything into it *except* the gatherer, excluding the attempt to include oneself from the distance of one’s fundamental individuality, revealing nothing *about* the

This eventful release from the sense of one's self, the self being stopped as the machine of one's identity, the coming to a stop of the self one has mastered through a sort of blind impersonation, seems to me to warrant the title of "therapy," that is, when the exposure of a text through the process of reading affords, in return, the exposure of the reader within, or as, or in the process of writing, the written interpretation. In this sense, in the spirit of therapy, I have said that the text can appear (or dawn) as a clue to something unknown and perhaps unknowable about ourselves, although I've been trying to suggest simultaneously that it is hardly the sort of clue sought to solve a riddle as if reading were nothing more than a way of playing hide-and-seek with our best kept secrets. For this clue *unsought* we need a conception of "the clue" that the seeker does

one "behind" it except that he or she is perfectly assumable by a variety of pronominal linguistic forms – echoes of the pure subject of the verb within language. Whichever words, in the end, that we use to describe our selves, others, or otherness, do not – having ended – lead to or back to anything (subject or object) that we could call separate (separable from the structure), for to do so would be to have in use – before we can say "I" – yet another continuous or at the very least consistent term. Facts derived from our use of language (all facts to some extent) are first and foremost facts *about* language – our use of it and its use of us – as insignificant as these may be. And this fact about fact is to take nothing away from the facts themselves as they occurred and continue to occur in the world as actual observable instances. But the peculiarly self-referential fact of the self – the existence of our presence to ourselves and in the world and with others with the same presence of existence – is not only not an exception to the rule of language but is also the imposition of all the rules, the cause, if not the source, of all our criteria. The writing or speaking of language *posits* a writing or speaking subject who can then relate to the world only *after* the use of language is permitted to constitute the conditions of all relations. So this use of the "widest" of words to designate the existence of the subject as significantly more substantial (and unconditional) than even these words all told can suggest – the subject (pure subject of the verb) as separate and irrespective and perhaps even *above* words altogether – would presume that we know to whom we are referring, that is, who all these people *are* as people with selves to call their own, which amounts to presuming the self as an exception to the rule of the fact that we can't truly know "them," in the same way that we can't establish tenable connections between "us" or "I" or "we" and their objects as long as words remain in control of our criteria. And what else am I, for you, but them – one of these "them" in words like the rest of them? You and I, here and now, bring each other together, but the fact that we speak the same language is what keeps us together by keeping us apart.

not know to seek out, or does not know is “seekable,” and hence does not know is sorely missing, but nevertheless pursues until it suddenly appears, falling in his or her lap, before becoming – shining – the desired clue.

A somewhat hypothetical scenario might help remind us or, failing that, at least help us to visualize just how common and even pragmatic this “finding without seeking” actually is: When someone tells me that a work of art “spoke” to him, going on to explain (if he can) what it said, I sometimes remember to take that to mean that what it succeeded to “say” is precisely what he needed to “hear,” that is, precisely the sort of context of communication that he lacked the means to impart to himself. But not always can I be counted on to know where he is coming from. While trying to understand him (what he is saying he understood), I might forget to take him *at his word*: I might simply be blind and deaf to the fact that he, in relating a past experience, is still in the process of finding the words he is saying and thus still immersed in the act of coming-to-terms because he is still coming to terms with words themselves as the guides and measurements and presenters of experience. I might also fail to appreciate that my presence opposite him, while certainly the cause of his presence opposite me (and vice versa), does not necessarily constitute the call, as it were, for the occasion of his commitment to expression despite the fact that it is I, after all, who is addressed: His words, after all, are not solely for my understanding but are largely geared for the occasion in which his own understanding is on the line and even put to the test by whether or not *I* can understand *his* way of understanding. We tend to misunderstand someone else’s attempt to understand themselves just as often as we tend to miss the opportunities to catch our own gestures of self-understanding. A possible reason for this is that witnessing another’s

interpretation of an experience is liable to misunderstand that person's reluctance or eagerness or ambivalence to share it as being the result of the complex nature of the experience alone – how it was “like this” and *not* “like that” – as opposed to and at the expense of all the difficulties and frustrations and hesitations of sharing, particularly when one bears the burden of responsibility to compromise one's privacy for the sake of contributing to one's culture by connecting to one's community. And yet the struggle with extreme self-consciousness while expressing or narrating so-called resonant experiences has always remained, at bottom, a struggle with experiences of having been near totally and impossibly disarmed. The *total* disarmament of one's psychological foundations in the face of experience is, however, quite inconceivable, quite fantastical, because the self, I don't think, is not anything one could hope let alone want to lose: A sense of self is, at some basic level of consciousness, required to *undergo* our experiences if there is to be any chance of *having* them, once and for all, as future opportunities to return to them, draw from them and, if forgotten, be reminded of them as if recalled by them.³⁶

Works of art which are granted the power to stop the sense of self from starting *at* itself remind us that the road to self-knowledge not only leads equally outside of the self but can start “without” the self, without “the person” we can think we can know solely by way of thoughts of the self (i.e. in the acknowledgement of our own rejected thoughts). The self, by itself, which we wish to call ours, is analogous here to the sort of thought

³⁶ For a remarkably careful and succinct and imaginative philosophical-historical inquiry into the modern condition of experience as inextricably shaped by the “natural distortions” of the Cartesian subject's epistemological economy, I draw the reader's inevitably rewarded (and burdened) attention to Giorgio Agamben's *Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

(albeit the very thought of thought) whose terms (or grammar) we have yet to learn, or perhaps have resisted learning, how to be able to reject, which might explain why “we” can’t come back to ourselves with that certain alienated majesty the way the things *about* ourselves can. Perhaps an implicit, deeply rooted Cartesian criterion for thought still compels us to *maintain* the self as an abode for thought, to occupy a self as a stead *outside* of thought in which to think, as it were, in immaculate remove. There are questions, nevertheless, that we can still put to this remarkably stubborn Cartesian legacy even if we have no intention whatsoever of abandoning it: Why must thinking come *after* a thinker? Why must it originate *within* a thinker? Why do we think (or is it a belief?) that thinking *implies* our confirmation? What do we wish confirmed that is not in the midst of occurring? And supposing for a moment that the human subject were, in fact, a transcendental entity, what could be so important about it as to be *more* important, more *prominent*, than an account of the process of thought itself, regardless of “who” or “what” is “doing” the thinking?³⁷

I suppose the start of an answer, at least to these last two questions, would be the ‘I’, the mysterious letter-word ‘I’. We want to be able to say ‘I’, aloud, back to someone who has said it or found a way to affirm it first, or towards ourselves in response to

³⁷ In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche’s waning patience with unquestioned attributions of thought to the Cartesian ego results, once again, and in prescient anticipation of Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, in a brutal unmasking (courtesy of intellectual conscience) of the language games indulged in the attempt to contain thought within an artificial causality of consciousness: “A thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, not when ‘I’ wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts to say that the subject ‘I’ is the condition of the predicate ‘think.’ *It* thinks; but that this ‘it’ is precisely the famous old ego is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an ‘immediate certainty.’ [. . .]. Even the ‘it’ contains an *interpretation* of the process, and does not belong to the process itself.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997), p. 24. (Nietzsche’s emphasis)

ourselves through various acts of writing and address. A word referring to the agency “behind” the words, thus echoing in our every word, haunting every step of our lives through words, there is pressure nonetheless to officially state ourselves back into the world we are wording (by way of this word) and are perhaps resigned to word (as a result, perhaps, of this same word), as if words alone take the measure of the world we must live in. But is it not this fact about the ‘I’ – that as the subject *par excellence* it can literally symbolize our momentous reassertion of existence in the world – which makes us make of it an immaculate substitution of ourselves, a seamless substitution akin perhaps to a form of idolatry, of false idolatry? Doesn’t the person who “has the word ‘I’ at his disposal [have] the quickest device for concealing himself?”³⁸ But which or what self is Cavell referring to? Who is this self that will hide precisely within its most performative expression? And what is it about this self, this particular moment of selfhood, that we have been so strategically avoiding? And how have we been able to avoid it for so long and with nothing more than a single word uttered before, always before, all the words that would otherwise expose us? The answering of these questions, not to mention the previous constellation, would take me well beyond the scope of my powers over and above the scope of this final chapter. So all I will say, less by way of response than acknowledgement, is that such questions about who the ‘I’ is are difficult to answer, or unanswerable depending on the question, mostly because of “who we are” that there can be a question at all about “what we are.” (Why, after all, is there this need to name what (if anything) *that* is?) There is a definite trace of the Poet archetype at the bottom or base (call it the heart) of each of us that Keats, in suffering from, was

³⁸ Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love,” in *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), p. 151.

responding to: the plight of an unpoetical nature. The observer, the beholder, the dancer, the chameleon. The wretchedly wakeful. On our feet after The Fall (from the grace, say, of animal silence) and no fixed identity but in our words, to our words, as inferences of countless inscriptions or victims of countless possessions.

In uttering the word ‘I’ we also show the need, deeper than any longing, to be indissolubly single. Without it, without the impetus to capture all our selves in it, without “a self” sufficiently committed to its own coherency to justify calling on a single mirror of a letter, we would be stranded on the ground surrounded by the most unclimbable mountains – tall peaks from which to reflect upon our participation as a force at play in the reality down below – without a hold by which to disassociate ourselves and even retreat (de-poeticize) from all the various entanglements of participant forces, and risk living the life of a Keats or, riskier still, the life of a Kafka.³⁹ Apparently, Kafka did not

³⁹ The risk of such a life, if we can permit ourselves to imagine it, is not the risk of losing an identity altogether, but rather of having more than one to be at a given time. This action of *having* more than one being, of having to cope and contend with a multiple or fractured ego, is regulated by a self-concept that, while nothing more or less than a powerful referent or force of reference, cannot therefore be identifiable, or even so much as relatable, with all of them combined or even any one of them on their own. The sense of frailty and security in relation to something “misty and immovable” at the fore of consciousness does not properly constitute a philosophical move and therefore does not necessarily succumb to philosophical misconception. When consciously or unconsciously utilized, the concept of “the self” is, too, a *circumstance*. For example, take the frame of a painting. If it is deemed necessary to the painting’s sheer visibility (as it was for the congested and somewhat collage-like displays at the salons in 18th century Paris), it can’t be a part of the painting at the same time as a condition for its existence – an existence of the imagination. The concept of “the self” as it applies to passionately unpoetical natures is perhaps the core circumstance of a life of the imagination that is won from the survival, although hardly the defeat, of the madness of contemplation. A philosopher like Wittgenstein might have suffered from uncertainty and could even be said to have treated it in his type of philosophical labor, but if that were the case could he not also have *thrived* by it so as to live in the only way possible for him? The logic of a cure acknowledges the right of the illness to its logic, and the “ill of soul” who exercise this right by crafting the perfect, most proportionate cure can make public to themselves the

regard himself as a true writer of stories until he finally found himself able to substitute 'he' for 'I' without hesitation, no longer recognizing any intrinsic difference between the two pronouns, finding (or losing, or becoming) himself in the third person. Similarly Keats, in speaking of himself as a poet in the long passage from his letters quoted earlier, has no decisive use for the word 'I' either. He only begins to use it when he sees what remains of his self – separate from all speculations – as indifferent in nature, seeing no way around the fact that he must be, that is, still be, the *he who is dissolved* by the thinking and the writing of poetry despite the fact that the "he who is dissolved" is always necessarily stripped of its own proof. ("If, then, he [the poet] *has* no self, and "if I am" a Poet, where is the Wonder that "*I*" should say "*I*" would write no more?")

Let us return for a final, brief moment to his highly revelatory predicament. He was confessing his guilt that he *will* go on writing poetry despite not being the poet to write it *with*, for to have something to write *about* (emerging from the depths of immersion) is to render his character unpoetical and hence his identity all but missing. When he has (in hand) something to write, the writing that comes out will be the outcome of his "being read." As long as the object of his contemplation sustains him, his rights of passage shall open like a book in which nothing, yet, has been written. Writing would be the exercising of this right to pass into a state of passage, a state not unlike the one we ascribe to written passages in a text where the person of the writer is scaled incrementally into the steps of the individual sentences. But is it accurate to describe this writing as "a way" of writing or a method to start writing? Or ought we rather to consider what gets

secret of homeostasis: exercising stasis, destabilizing it, for medicine as much as for philosophy.

written, regardless of how or why, as *a phenomenon* of writing, as the fruit of the writer's labor in writing out his or her possibilities anonymously?

This is what seems to be worrying Keats. He senses that to write *this way* (as an indiscriminate and devout reader of things poetical) is to sacrifice the ground on which to call the writing *his*. There ought therefore to be no wonder from anyone if he were to tell us that he *should* never again write, as long as writing continues to be understood (written and then read) as the externalized thoughts of the person of the author and not also, and perhaps primarily, the work of an interpreter. It is a wretched thing to have to confess: not feeling entitled to write your reading unless you are in complete prophetic control of the writing, hence under the false impression that you are complete without genuine acts of immediate response, hence in a false place above your own words where you are convinced that you have already known them and are only now declaring them as a final ritual for passing them by or as a last resort for passing them on to "those less fortunate." However, you could have cause to celebrate the sacrifices of solitude should your writing function as an interpretation of the self you have delivered, unknowingly, to a process of reading. "*There* are the stars, and they who can may *read* them,"⁴⁰ wrote Thoreau alone in the woods at Walden. If you can, proceed astronomically. But if you have yet to commit yourself to discovering as opposed to forging connections between your instances, it is best to avoid misreading such complexity and diminishing such immensity – clouding the firmament of a life – with mere astrology.

⁴⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), p. 66. (Mine and Thoreau's emphasis)

Conclusion

Exemplary Work(ing)s of Art

Consider for argument's sake – but also for its own sake – the following line of reasoning: “What I find most rewarding about the creative process is that it brings about ideas that I could never have conceived had I not gone through it. Had I left myself to my own devices and kept my hands tied, I would have found confidence in the very ideas I would later find so easy to reject. The process showed me things that I could never have shown myself and therefore knew better than I did what I myself wished to know.”

This sort of testament points to one way, if not the main way, of claiming and exercising (claiming *as* exercising and exercising *as* claiming) our rights of passage; and by that I mean the precise “whereabouts” – the existential coordinates or conditions if you will – of self-cultivation within a materialistic, hence materially binding, culture. *Dream of Light*, through and through, is at once the result, or better yet the fruit, of its unique demonstration: the power of freedom to appropriate what is given. But contingency, in accordance with my understanding of it, gets in the way of this right to pass – snags and wedges our reading those rights – through feelings of extreme disorientation and profound forsakenness at the threshold of becoming. And yet, underlying such a predicament – facing the wall of the world as it were – is the possibility for a new beginning to emerge out of the fullest measure of the self's most urgent reach towards itself; and what seemed a wall turns out to be a door or, less conveniently metaphorically, an unapproachable horizon receding, entreating, beckoning us to expose the illusion of its wild infinity. There are, I don't doubt, a myriad of ways of

narrating what I have, until now, avoided calling “the redemption of contingency.” Mine, I realize, can be none other than my own, which is as it should be, for that fact could not be more consistent with what I *have* been calling, in so many words, “the fate of contingency.” But if it seems as if my narrative as a whole flirts with the prospect of becoming a meta-narrative, striving to tell this philosophical story once and for all and from every theoretical angle in the hopes of putting a permanent lid on the problem of contingency, it is primarily due to the difficulties inherent in recognizing the problem itself as, on the one hand, the beginning of a vitally important and monumentally progressive *solution* to metaphysical deception and, on the other hand, and as a consequence of its ambition, one so paradoxically deceiving as to be its *own* solution. Indeed, if I’ve come up with anything true to the “nature” of contingency it is that it persists, despite my claims to the contrary, as the first and only existential problem whose solution depends on its staying *unsolved*. But in staying unsolved the problem remains – do I need to tell *you*? – frustratingly unfulfilling, and all the more so for spurring our thoughts headfirst into complex conceptions (call them promises) of action. Non-fulfillment, where frustration and disappointment over the cultivation of contingency are best described as our reactions to it as opposed to its symptoms in us, is contingency declaring itself, biting back, holding on as if here to stay – our freedom holding onto us for dear life as it were. I gather that this is the reason why most attempts to grapple with contingency (to settle accounts with it over and above a fuller understanding of it) amount to a frantic chase after an elusive culprit, only to discover that whatever has been conceptually surrounded and pinned down along the way (and paraded in the end) bears little resemblance to what contingency was thought or believed or suspected to be, but

rather, upon closest inspection of the aftermath's unsettling calm, yet another indication of "it." As a result, here, contingency became more defining than definable, more plight than purpose, more mirror-like than wall-like (or a combination between the two that can't be shattered and few think to traverse), which is why, in my story, it has the power to migrate or spread or shape-shift from the world to the self, because I found its source in the hands that touch: "the Midas touch of modernity."¹

I realize that my deployment of contingency may appear to be more or less conceptually isolated (confined as it is to the second chapter which traces an evolution of the concept starting with the trace, or impression of a trace, of cinematic representation), but to reduce the role of contingency to the concept of contingency (determined in large measure by the umbrella of the word "contingency") would be to underestimate the sheer amount of pressure I've been placing throughout on the role of art. Nothing less than clarifying, negotiating and redeeming contingency as such is what I have been implicitly expecting aesthetics to provide the tools for. This emphasis on art, however, has required that it carry well beyond the existence of specific works of art or texts, beyond even their appropriate cultural and historical contexts, to a less immediate (but no less immanent) "past and future" through considerations of both creativity and criticism, amounting to something on the lines of a generative paradigm I wish to call an "arc of discourse." It has been my argument as much as my hope that within such a generative circuit (creativity to constitution to recreation) our consciousness of the phenomenon of contingency within the private and public realms *outside* the realm of art (the relentless burden of the irresolvable problem *as* solution) has the opportunity to undergo our

¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity*, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 44.

aesthetic cultivation, however artificial and idealistic it may be. (*Cultivation* is my choice of word here because I imagine the “soil” of contingency to be the richest of them all, as having the most potential to grow the self into a state of vitality and splendor, particularly upon finding oneself in a state of “thrownness,” while also being fittingly the most difficult to till, requiring not just the most knowledge but the best, most efficient “technologies” of knowledge.) The basic requirement of this cultivation is not that of contingency-consciousness spanning (and surviving) the full length of the arc of discourse: the journey from contingency to necessity – “the way of all problematic individuals” – is not necessarily in the hands of a *single* individual or consciousness to accomplish. I am not suggesting, therefore, that one has to be, in turn, or simultaneously, artist, spectator and critic in order to follow meaning to its logical conclusion by keeping it in a constant state of flux. The fact of the matter is that complications in the generative continuity of meaning will no doubt emerge when the flow of this circuit slows or sputters or gets cut off as a result of temptations inherent in art, criticism and spectatorship to work texts, interpretations and judgments into irreversible states of permanence (processes into texts, readings into interpretations, experiences into judgments). The pursuit of permanence and the wish for permanence (both symptoms of the myth of permanence) are pursuits and wishes for a resolute finality, severe enough not only to cease but quite literally to substitute the end – “completion” – for the work itself (“work” understood in accordance with the transitive application of the verb “to work”). I referred to this reversal briefly and somewhat obliquely at the beginning of the chapter on *Dream of Light*, and undertook in the bulk thereafter to take to task my intuitions that this particular film was as close to being a document of its own making as

possible in film or any other medium – an artwork documenting the work of its art – without, as I put it there, crossing the line of the made (i.e. deconstructing itself as a way of referring to itself). I cited, but did not quote, an extremely heavy, disorienting and unnerving remark of Walter Benjamin who recorded the following as the dreaded thirteenth thesis regarding the writer’s technique: “The work is the death mask of its conception.”² This idea had tremendous consequences for me when I stumbled upon it (and on it, I should add) some time ago. And it continues to hang somewhat ominously in spirit over the entire thesis as the sort of critical insight that is perhaps better left in the dark (as a doodle or fragment too volatile to be released from the margins into the body of work presented here as finished, done, despite having to do with the *impossibility* of anything being completely over and done with). Although, should it continue to remain in *these* margins any longer, there is the risk of abandoning a guiding intuition that the work of art is, somehow, somewhere, marginal in nature: If works of art can be accurately described as concealments of their own conception, then to what extent are they even capable of being reached? To what extent does our conception of the work of art as something finished conceive its *work* as fundamentally inaccessible, over and done with, sufficiently worked-through and successfully worked-out, fundamentally surpassed, and therefore somehow ontologically behind or separate from or perhaps even lost to the work of art as such, as if artworks could be ontologically superior to themselves by ceasing to work *as* “art”?

² Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 459.

I should say straight away that I am not out to criticize, on ontological grounds, great works of art called “masterpieces.” Such works are, typically, great for a reason, and continue to be generous with their powers of inspiration to keep those reasons coming in ways no one could have predicted. Instead, what I’m suggesting we expose here is a certain “masochism of belittlement” stemming from the affective power of art and underlying our general intuitions regarding a work of art’s possession of and entitlement to greatness despite its shortcomings, intuitions which have found their way into some established criteria for the masterpiece. The phrase, I realize, sounds harsh and extreme and may appear at first glance in poor taste, but let me ground it with an example of what I mean by it. Regarding *The Death of the Virgin*, a masterpiece by the Italian painter Caravaggio, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the experience of standing before the sheer volume and intensity of that painting’s epic display of presence as one of alienation and loneliness and unworthiness:

On the threshold, all at once, a scene stands out. This scene is not staged for us; it is not laid out for the attention or the intention of a subject. Everything happens in an indifference to the visitor, and it even seems that it ought to remain hidden from whoever is not, already, one of a familiar circle. No one looks at us or invites us in. Indiscreet, we have, in sum, entered by force. But this force of intrusion is that of the scene itself. If one dared, one might say that it ravishes us. In any case, we are seized there, on the spot, as in a transport of the place that

would be nothing other than place itself, without inside or outside – nothing but the flattening of a plane.³

Its presence is described as fierce, its bearing unbearably overbearing, as if a reflection in water – perfectly still – had slipped back unnoticed into the very reality it casts anew. Though it hangs on a wall in a gallery where its sole purpose is to be on display, it is felt not to directly address the viewer or noticeably insist on the attention it inspires. On top of describing it as “indifferent,” a reluctant host to a cautious and oversensitive visitor, Nancy proceeds to justify his sense of the painting’s indifference to him by describing his visitation as an intrusion – guilty of a wrongful trespass upon a vividly reified yet bygone intimacy that has no way of defending itself. If he dared (and he does), the painting *ravishes* him, and he likes it. He seems to favor the strange, hardly describable pleasure-pain-fear-ecstasy feeling of being simultaneously overpowered and overlooked because, I gather, the painting is felt stable enough (strong is not quite the right word here) to alter the place of his being, the consciousness of his place, that is, his three-dimensional self-consciousness, to fit the form of the artwork’s lesser dimension – “nothing but the flattening of a plane” – and become the ecstatic prisoner of the aesthetic moment – “seized there on the spot as in a transport.” Transport is the metaphor deployed for this unique experience of being *taken aback*, helplessly and unpredictably and into one’s mortality, as opposed to being the one who is constantly *taking over* the field of intelligibility with readymade categories and conceptions. Transported as if back to himself, alone, he remains stuck on the threshold of comprehension, lighter and leaner

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 57.

than is humanly or consciously possible, in an almost desperate attempt to lure the inhuman painting out of its self-imposed fortress of solitude: silent, static, flat and past.

As partial as I am to these sorts of aesthetic experiences – part of the fun of art, after all, is basking in a kind of secular or purely sensible mysticism – I find this type of testimony disconcerting because it seems to betray (quite indiscreetly) what I referred to above as a masochism of belittlement plaguing aesthetic criteria and thus motivating aesthetic judgments. But, at the same time, there is nothing really unusual about such a response once you get passed the fact that subjectivity must undergo abstraction as a consequence of a subject's most violent appreciation – a spectatorial pathology which seems to be more and more standard by the day in works of criticism (even those of primarily philosophical concern like Nancy's *The Muses*). Accounts of art, and perhaps to some extent all histories of art, remain for the most part accounts about *accomplishment* – a subject that the accounts and histories themselves pursue as a goal – insofar as the drift of a particular history is thought to depend upon the interjections of its currents. And while it is not always clear in any given account what makes a work of art *stand* (up or out or against the test of time), what couldn't be clearer is the sheer force, call it the unconditional obviousness, by which some do and some don't – for whom, I feel like saying, it makes no difference – where the ones that do stand *tall*. (We boost them up.) The ones that don't are those which barely got off the ground in the first place. (We hold them there.) In either case, however, the work of art in question is bizarrely reducible to a claim that is accepted or rejected as if true or false.

If some glibness enters my thinking here it is probably the result of my own criticisms (worries, doubts, fears, etc.) getting the better of me. Perhaps the power of art

to cast a spell, or break the spell of mental and emotional stagnation, will turn out to be as agreeable or as truthful a characterization of art because *that* is what the great majority of people expect (or hope) from art, whether or not it delivers on its promise. All the same, I do not think it off base or ill founded to acknowledge at least a sense of an instinct or impulse to aestheticize the aesthetic as part of a fantasy in which aesthetic objects assume the look and feel and ready-at-hand efficiency of actual objects. So I make no accusations here. If a teleological myth of perfection and permanence is what is unconsciously at stake in aesthetics, then it takes two (as always) to tango. It is possible and fruitful and immeasurably profound – I agree – to fall in love with a work of art; all I wish to say is that such emotions, in confusing the work's independence with its autonomy, further elevate and empower the already high and mighty position of the work by going profoundly unrequited. And aside from being painful and humiliating, nothing is more detrimental to the ability to have a balanced conversation.

That being said, there is also a “history of hesitation” specific and peculiar to the 20th century in general (or to the time we call ours), one of doubt, of a reluctance to uphold, of *nihilism*, underlying and sometimes informing works of art that do not set out to establish or reinforce absolutes and, as a result, no longer depend on the old Hegelian conception of art as the sensible presentation of the Idea. A remark by another German philosopher/critic, Ernst Bloch, and dating from approximately the same time as Benjamin's “death mask,” provides this opposite, perhaps more optimistic picture of the work (more specifically, for him, the philosophical work, which isn't the same I realize, and definitely not sensible in the Hegelian sense of the word) as perpetually flooded,

hence in some sense continuously reconstituted, by the “memory” of its origin and development:

Yet the beginning could never quite be expelled from philosophy; it echoes significantly in the great systems, which separates the metaphysicians from the actuaries of cosmic explanation. It also ties philosophy again and again to youth, makes metaphysics at every point *impatient* again, *conscientious* – the wisdom of age in the *early, unerring freshness* of adolescent, primordial wonder.⁴

Elsewhere in Bloch’s piecemeal (“scrupulously unsystematic”) philosophy, a theory, a vision, a peculiar power of insight into the tentativeness of even the most resolute explanation is called for with reference to a potion, to a sort of alchemy in sensitivity with the power to set pulsing again the wisdom of the work’s wild inner youth. “The potion,” he writes, “not from any witch’s kitchen, is still unknown that would completely rescue youth beyond age, the beginning beyond the work, make them visible.”⁵ This prescription of a potion, however, is so fanciful (and funny) that it borders on being completely self-defeating as a theory. And yet, the potent sense of irony in the metaphor functions to vividly reflect our powerlessness to cheat death, reverse time or capture the elusiveness of essences like ghosts transcending the barriers of appearances into time immemorial. Bloch, in effect, suggests that although it may not be within our means to conjure up the beginning from the end (raise the dead), it is nevertheless still possible,

⁴ Ernst Bloch, *Traces*, ed. W. Hamacher, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 170. (Italics mine)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

that is, within our means, to refuse the binary distinction (the convenient *superstition* that the dead are gone).

About a half a decade after Benjamin and Bloch express some suspicion towards textual finality almost in passing, the philosopher/critic Edward Said, in a comparatively systematic book-length study of the major textual processes of modern literature, attempts a theorization of the many shifting parameters and peregrinations of “the beginning” – its mythology, rhetoric, reflexivity, practicality, possibility, duration, etc. He gives it the name, too, of this widest of words, *Beginnings*,⁶ and it is near encyclopedic in its coverage and scrutiny of reflexive representations and motifs that writers use to call attention to the act of calling upon a “second” world through language. The decision to begin writing fiction *truthfully* is described as having the effect (on writers, writing, and the written) of a sort of epistemological break or rupture in consciousness that is motivated, perhaps, by an urgent plea for a viable twist of separateness from, and therefore perspective on, the surrounding continuity and confining repetitions of the everyday (or “first” world).⁷ It is eloquently rigorous work, shedding much light on the concept of the beginning through analyses of its most explicit literary enactments, but it does not venture down the dark, uncharted path opened (though not entered) by Bloch. In fact, I would say that Said proceeds in the opposite direction, away from slippery concepts (and slippery unsystematic or aphoristic methodologies) such as Benjamin’s “death mask” or Deleuze’s “diagram” or Barthes’s “punctum” (not to mention the brute anonymity of “contingency”) to more linear explications of their powers of determinacy over the logical conventions of narrative, the most predominant

⁶ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1975).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

being the professed will to begin, to change or to die, with respect to characters and narrators and narratives as a whole. Rather than work towards the register of literature's *pre-articulation* in the act of writing itself, Said focuses on scenarios whose content alludes to the idea of process, perhaps signifying its own process, albeit a process mediated so often by the voice of the fictional protagonist who is typically cast as the personification of the author. He writes about the steps, paths, prints, transitions and transformations depicted by certain novelists at certain times and for certain historical reasons, but without treading anywhere near those which "echo significantly" in the novels themselves. Perhaps this avoidance comes out of the fear of jeopardizing the resiliency of the novel as an integral whole within a siege of cultural forces, or of discrediting the labor and genius owed to the novelist who managed an intervention in the culture in the form of a contribution to that culture (the very culture to which he or she remains a product), or just as well out of too much respect (hence fear) for the grandeur of the accomplishment (the pleasure of the text compelling all inquiry). The *live trace*, however, is not reducible to a self-reflexive gesture, for that would reduce it to nothing more than a trace of itself, that is, to a representation as opposed to the continuation of the process of representation. The concept or *hypothesis* (in honor of Bloch's "scientific" intuitions) is much closer to what I referred to in the first chapter on *Dream of Light* as the organic "self-consciousness" of the work of art, and which that film, I hope I have shown, stands as exemplary, perhaps epitomizing it to the point where this particular set of quotation marks can, in reference to it, be comfortably clipped.

Bloch's belief that the spirit of the beginning continues to echo significantly in the great systems seems a hopeful albeit seductive conception. But I am also doubtful as to

whether or not such “system-based” works are in need of liberation and revival or are in any way impaired as a result of their conclusiveness and overconfidence. Indeed, like Bloch, I long to perceive the “cracks” concealed (or filled) within the strongest, cleanest, tightest of systems, but so far my experiences with such systematic efforts (Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, etc.) have proven just how strongly, even necessarily, a death mask can *function* – sitting on the face of a thinker who, beneath it, thinks himself right and needs to for the sake of knowledge and, perhaps, his own sake. This mask, I realize, has its advantages, which are also its remedies. It is not my interest or desire to break down, in the name of some principle, what has been built to stand up and to endure (so as to ultimately impart). There is no justifying turning towards a few loose bricks, or loosening bricks stable enough to hold, at the expense of a system’s meticulous and monumental engineering of meaning, however idealistically or arrogantly it presides as definitive. Such traces, to my mind, aren’t even worth preserving, just as those that are deliberately left behind are preserved under a false pretext and ought never to have been found under the wrong impression, so to speak. Singling out “the flaw” as the most significant secret of “the accomplishment” because *there* conviction came so suddenly to a halt or coherence flew as suddenly out the window is to do little more than to fetishize the finitude of an expression. And, to make matters worse, these sorts of critical approaches can serve as occasions for the worst kind of melancholy where celebrations of life in the form of authentic and spirited acts of creation are disregarded, if not mourned, as nothing more than denials of death. Other traces, on the other hand, are less the exception than the rule, particularly when enough combine into a pattern establishing *the rule of the exception* as

a basis for textual sovereignty. Ruling the exceptional and salvaging all contingency, this type of trace makes meaning by enlivening the medium through which meaning circulates. Alive and enlivening, still alive, for better and for worse, they take on a great importance, or become worthy of our contact, because when put together into the whole of a work of art they constitute a more faithful remembrance of ourselves, our living limitations, which assure us our ceaselessness, our eternal confirmation as beings who can mean without meaning to (meaning more than we could ever hope to keep track of, let alone know). So how do we know one when we see one? Where, in what kind of text, which textual context, are these traces to be found ruled into a whole? Under what conditions and criteria? What kind of text *in the end* can function as the *context of its own conception*? What, exactly, *is* a film like *Dream of Light*?

Allow me to return to the primary prescription by which I undertook an initial reading of the film: "It is, perhaps, a diary film, which of course does not necessarily make it a film diary, for that would reduce it to a complex albeit random stream of thoughts (or observations) riding, securing and resisting, simultaneously, the inexorable current of the everyday." The distinction now seems to me more important than the prescription, for the somewhat paradoxical prescription of "the diary" (the process through which one communicates to oneself and by oneself) may or may not hold for a finished film (or anything called "finished" for that matter). Nothing prevents all the formal and structural affinities disclosed between the two forms (diary film and film diary) from being classified as mere resemblances. Be that as it may, let us go with the more genre-sounding expression "diary film," the one that correctly places the emphasis of diary *on* film (as in "action film" or "horror film") albeit without much precedence and

hence without a guarantee of consensus. *Dream of Light*, we might recall, is constantly reporting/recording the date even when very little – sometimes almost nothing at all – has transpired to affect the progress of Antonio Lopez’s painting of the quince tree with sun. Victor Erice, to repeat, made a promise to himself to film each and every day, even if the new day was little more than a repetition of the previous one. The film, obviously, is the result of the exclusion of the great majority of its day-to-day tracking (though it is worth mentioning in response to this fact that Erice does acknowledge most of the days with at least a shot of the painting against a black backdrop). But what it keeps (I kept on saying) is not at the expense of what it excludes as in honor of it: standing in for “the rest” without ever substituting “the best” for it. That is why that which is kept – this honoring – is not accompanied by any embellished justification or proof of worth (just as the last bunch of leaves that remain on a tree at the onset of winter are seen as being no closer to the tree, no less the tree itself, than those which chanced to fall during its summer prime).

I have no intention here, in the wake of all that has come after it, of launching into another discussion of *Dream of Light*. If I don’t know what the film is after working through it from start to finish then perhaps I’ll never know. But it’s not that I don’t know. I do, at least I think I do, which is to say I’m satisfied for the time being. The knowledge I lack seems to be of a more practical sort: *Literally*, what *is* this film? What name does it go by? Or must we give it one? Which is to ask: What tradition does it belong to? And if to none or if none will take it – if too anomalous or original or promiscuous to directly fall in line with an established lineage of precursors – then where are its allies in the world? What else, past or present, is doing similar things in different ways or different things in similar ways without adopting one way or another? We have certain

responsibilities, I think, to texts we champion as significant as a result of their singularity – and no less to the cultures directly and indirectly inheriting such texts – to show that they are not alone in what they do, that what they *do* is being done – deemed worth doing or “the thing” to do – in different ways by different people in different areas of expertise looking for different alternatives or methods for reaching very similar conclusions. Otherwise, to allow these texts to revel too much in their own light, which would be to render them extraordinary beyond all measure, is to put them face to face with themselves and hence the miserable fate of being esoterically the first and last of their kind. Meanwhile, the constellation of stars to which the one-of-a-kind invariably belongs has yet to be drawn, perhaps because some constellations are less obvious to discern than others, leaving this star a rogue of the night, lonely but bright, and in no apparent need of support. And yet with a slight tilt of the head and a little imagination . . .

So what I would like to do is offer a surprising and somewhat unusual comparison between *Dream of Light* and a completely different kind of text, a text that, for all its difference, no one would hesitate to categorize as criticism. Differences in kind between two incongruent concepts or methods or objects is one thing, but when *actual things* come to substitute mere notions it is often the case that any similarity can turn out to be a necessary affinity, the start or sign of a shared logic, as opposed to a mere resemblance, for resemblances are harder to dismiss or even minimize if they are perceived as being fundamentally mutual. But I don't want to get ahead of myself by overselling what are still affinities between anomalies. The work of criticism I'm proposing as companion

piece to *Dream of Light*, coming all the way from the field of art history, is *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* by T.J. Clark.⁸

The Sight of Death consists of radically detailed “formal analysis” criticism of two paintings by Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, but is not, due to the seemingly indiscriminate cultivation and accumulation and reconstitution of details, in any formal way properly *on* or *about* them. As a whole, it is more accurately described as an account of an established and well-respected art historian who, in a negative frame of mind at the start of the new millennium, unexpectedly crosses paths with the two aforementioned paintings together in a small room at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles at the start of a six-month research stint for which routine Picasso-plans were already in place. (“It was not clear what would occupy my time in Los Angeles, but the most likely bet was Picasso between the wars. Work on that subject had already begun. The notes and books for it were in my car.”⁹) So he had no designs whatsoever to write the book that is now ours to read. Day by day, without realizing that the days were passing by so effortlessly, he responded to the two paintings, individually and comparatively, in his own way and in his own time, probing all that he saw as he saw it in the form of written (and passing) responses. Each response was logged as an entry in a journal that he only began to realize could become a book, a

⁸ T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006). Clark is the sort of art historian so aware of the assumptions informing his approaches to the past via the presentness of paintings that he makes a habit of breaking with his critical, interpretive and speculative practices the moment they start operating too smoothly (or get away from him) and turn habitual. So much so that he sometimes seems to manage to practice what Stanley Cavell sometimes seems merely to preach, albeit through no shortage of his own preachy reminders to himself in *The Sight of Death* to remain morally upright as a critic, that is, steadfastly self-critical, without weakening the hand that writes by overworking the one that erases.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

finished work, when he saw himself as passed the point of no return and would therefore continue to see and think and write until the end came with as little invitation as the beginning. (“I began writing, and could not stop. All I can offer by way of an excuse is that this happened, or seemed to happen, involuntarily. I certainly did not think, when I made my first diary entry on *Landscape with a Calm* a day or so after coming across it in these new circumstances, that what I was doing was ‘working on Poussin.’”¹⁰) The book, such as it is, is a record of a dialogue between an extremely patient and persevering viewer and two inconspicuously challenging paintings, concentrated over many months and petering out over a few years. The published material, if scrutinized under the lens of a more conventional methodological practice, could just as easily be used as notes for the writing of a book the result of which would be the systematic evaluation and processing of them (a likely fate for the Picasso-between-the-wars book). Instead, by preserving the chronological and multilayered development of his thought, staying true to all the hesitations and redundancies as equally as the breakthroughs, a different kind of book was written: *the writing of the book*. (“I have tried not to have the rewriting of the entries dim their initial charmed life. Mistakes and obscurities I have tackled; outright redundancies pruned; but often the writing, at least in the beginning, seems to me now somewhat awkward or crude or glib, and part of the time I have left ill alone. I want the whole record of repetition-compulsion, warts and cosmetics and all.”¹¹)

The “result” of this “approach” (funny words here) is that Clark’s writing *temporalizes* the Poussin paintings at the expense of subjecting them to his own intrinsic temporality (i.e. argument), in the same way as Erice’s filming gathers in all the circles of

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 3-4.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 9.

time within his horizon at the expense of forcing his own singular circle (i.e. narrative) around the immediate surroundings of his subject. Both, we could say, insofar as they have succeeded to document their daily encounters with their respective objects of interest (or is it now obsession?), complete those documents by delivering them raw, that is, by editing them in a manner as not to edit out but to cherish as dramatically historical (and dramatic on their own) all the initial wayward stumbling and occasional disturbances of doubt that, if acknowledged every step of the way, eventually give way to balance, insight, maturity or wisdom, and sometimes – pending a bit of good fortune – epiphany.¹² This “making” gets *made* (methodologically?) when the process ends at the same place as where it began, although in a different time, hence space, which is only possible if the beginning was completely sidestepped or slipped into (as it was for filmmaker and critic alike). Ending then is a matter of finding out *why* one began as one did, *why* one’s intuitions were worth pursuing with such vigilance and, upon satisfactory answers, *what* the price of knowledge is: Why can I no longer *feel* the deep oneiric vibrations of *those* particular intuitions?

A specificity that definitely links *The Sight of Death* and *Dream of Light* is that both works, being works of their own making or working-through, acknowledge the daily framing of the weather as an inescapable and highly influential factor in their development and, perhaps, even their progress. What Clark is able to see in the Poussin

¹² Such a process, I feel like saying, reveals the truth about how muses work their magic, and why diligent workers in this vein might still want to appeal to superstitious explanations of their highest moments of clarity when *doubt* is revealed as the muse of all muses. A fog, it is true, can clear awfully fast, just as darkness lifts without much warning, but for those who struggle to find their way through thick and thin the first sign of light will always come from an adjustment to the dark. At which point, yes, fog clears and darkness lifts and spirits lead us to safety.

paintings, what Lopez is able to accomplish in his own painting, and what Erice is forced to reckon with throughout his adherence to Lopez's relationship with the quince tree is, to be sure, in the hands of the weather: the natural temperament of contingency, that indifferent resolve of external conditions surrounding human non-indifference. Each day, early in the morning, each of them takes back hold what is always theirs to let go and resumes from where they left off, which, we learn, is never as they left it. The quality of the light coming through the skylight in the Poussin room at the Getty where Clark does all his looking and writing turns from honey hued to bleakest gloom not only between but within days, determining to a large extent not only which details become visible but, more importantly, *how* they become visible, how they project as effects, hence whether or not they are even *effective*, having any effect at all on the consciousness with the most open pair of eyes. Aiming to paint a quince tree so intricately illuminated by the golden hues of autumn (a light so special for giving way to the steely faintness and harsh relentlessness of winter light), Lopez contends with long bouts of rain and periods of impenetrable overcast contagious to the season in which life and death are perfectly indistinguishable and hence unpredictable. As for Erice, such contingencies become the very stuff of his story, but that doesn't mean he would have told it by way of them had it been up to him alone. Just because he could not foresee what the day would bring, and preferred above all what he could not expect, does not mean that he did not carry with him, inside of him, the burden of certain hopes. (Thwarted intentions, after all, do not roll more easily off the back of someone whose primary intention is to *stand back*, for what is the intention of standing back if not to *withhold* one's intentions for what dreams may come?)

All this brings up the separate but related contingent phenomenon of unpredictable mental weather, a subject on which I find Emerson to be ironically at his best, taking advantage of his best and brightest of moods to reflect on the fact that moods don't last:

Our moods do not believe in each other. Today I am full of thoughts and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression, tomorrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall.¹³

What are great works of art if not the ideal form of their makers raised to the occasion – the power – of art? As the very promise of art this is, I believe, as it should be, and I don't think *Dream of Light* or *The Sight of Death* fall short of it, breaking it, even though they epitomize the sort of work that grounds its own perfection (death) by exposing it as finite (living on). (If I thought they suffered as a consequence of their achievement I would hardly be giving them the benefit of every conceivable doubt.) On the contrary, they are as realized, as fully achieved, as the best that art and criticism have to offer, and I have no doubt in my mind that this is due to the diaristic accounts of their own coming into being as a means of coming into their own. This fact of finding oneself a near total stranger to

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode in collaboration with Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1981), p. 231.

one's efforts upon returning to them in the morning – a weed by the wall of yesterday's towering glory – is the existential experience of contingency that the medium of the diary, scheduled for the quiet of the night, is meant to come to terms with: tracing, counting and accounting for the sporadic movements (or moods) which set the stage for the day's activities (and, on some days, those dark days of the mind, keep the curtains shut to the public). In using this medium to keep track of the whole record of contingency so as to resist the temptation to avoid or compensate for the inevitability or necessity of contingency, *Dream of Light* and *The Sight of Death* succeed in showing *how* contingency comes to be cultivated – very gradually, one day at a time, some days better than others, and always in the dark over persistence paying off. (One doesn't wake up to find that spring has arrived on the exact day of the vernal equinox. Although technically the earth's axis is completely level, unless it is unseasonable the weather that day, including the day after, bears all the weight of a characteristically relentless winter. Then all one can do is be patient. And patience, unlike persistence, pays off right away at least with the common sense to persist only over what is *humanly* possible.)

But persistence pays off too – eventually. As soon as it no longer *pays* to persist, something specific will have to be shown for all the work that went in. Both book and film, for this reason, climax at the end with the sense of having *reached* an end, a rock bottom. Intense, scrupulous and obstinate *looking* (at paintings, trees and time in transit) constitutes a payment, call it a sacrifice, for what lies beyond yet out in front, and which yields the reward – fear and ecstasy – of self-knowledge for the observer. While the knowledge gained by Clark, Lopez and Erice is unexpected and even somewhat undesired by them, it is not forced “out of left field” as it were, which is to say that the

turn towards the self is not self-indulgent but *self-transforming* if the self turns exactly away from itself only to find itself, upon returning to itself, reflected in a new light.

These people, for sure, go too far, all the way around to come full circle, but they do so in full awareness of Stanley Cavell's *grounds* for doing so: "Going too far is a risk inherent in the business of reading, and venial in comparison with not going far enough, not reaching the end; indeed it may be essential to knowing what the end is."¹⁴

¹⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 36-7.

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