Some Reflections on Bazin's and Cavell's Ontologies of Film

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Abstract. Many classical film theorists, including both realists and anti-realists, have built their respective aesthetics of film on ontological properties the photographic picture has been understood to have. In the post-classical era, Stanley Cavell's account of the ontology of film put forward in the second chapter of *The World Viewed* and building on a number of André Bazin's ideas has proven to be among the most influential in film studies. In this paper I criticize and provide alternatives to Cavell's description of what a photograph is of, his and Bazin's discussion of the relation between the photograph and the world, and finally, Cavell's thoughts on the viewers' spatiotemporal relation towards what a photograph is of. I conclude with an alternative set of necessary conditions to Noël Carroll's proposal for what a film is.

In order to be as precise as possible I will start off by clarifying some terminological issues. I will refer to any surface upon which films may be viewed as screens (e.g. movie screen, television screen, computer screen, etc). I will talk of anything played on a screen as screened. This makes standard film projections a subclass of screened phenomena. I will refer to pictures as conglomerates of the physical medium carrying the image *and* the image understood as an array of visual information. Therefore, I will say that a picture is of an image (which, in turn, may be of a particular object). On first inspection, the distinction between the two seems to be particularly fuzzy in the case of film projections. It would appear that during a projection there is nothing more than an image, that there is no physical support for it. However, one must not forget that in all of screening practices there indeed is a physical medium carrying the image – the surface. We can project all we want but if we do not hit upon a surface no image will come of it. Space does not suffice. Therefore, screen devices will by definition have a surface to screen upon.

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1. What is a Picture of?

Let us turn to photographs, privileged among film pictures by many – viz. André Bazin and Stanley Cavell.[1] We should be reminded that the classical photography the two talked about always involved at least a two-step production process. By clicking or rolling the camera the photosensitive storage medium came into contact with the light producing the initial photograph (often a negative). Thereafter, another automatic process like photographic or contacting printing would generate the positive, the type of photograph Bazin and Cavell regularly discuss. Unlike Cavell, I want to say that photograph is not of an object (e.g. a tree, a bird), although this might be its focus, its raison d'être, but that it is of an image (which is made out of objects among other things), of a visual field defined by the specifications of the apparatus taking the picture. Standard specifications dictate that the visual field of an average camera is monocular and framed.

I must admit I am somewhat perplexed why Cavell insists that a photograph is of an object and rejects the idea that it is of a visual array or an image for, photographs, obviously, need not be of any recognizable object and may amount to nothing more than blurry specks of visual information. Presumably Cavell's reasons have to do with his investment in ordinary language and statements such as "this is (a photograph of) your mother" which regularly accompany presentations of photographs. From the perspective of ordinary language use, saying that photograph is of a visual array (visual field, image) in which your mother is discernable, admittedly, does not sound as the most felicitous way of going about it. But that cannot be the whole story for Cavell also refrains from using ordinary statements such as "this is (a photograph) of Sam Spade" when discussing *The Maltese Falcon* and Humphrey Bogart's role in it, opting instead to talk of "Bogart".[2] Therefore, he is willing to sacrifice ordinary language use to

[1] André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Trans. and ed. Hugh Gray, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 1971); Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). Other notable theoreticians who build their respective aesthetics of film by privileging photographic pictures include Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) and Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

[2] Greta Garbo is also never referred to as any of the characters she plays.

focus on photographs before any imaginative engagement with them has taken place.[3] With that in mind, I do not see a reason why I would not be allowed to follow suit in order to be as precise as possible in articulating what a photograph is of. At this point someone might object and say that claiming a photograph is of a visual field is just a pedantic way of reminding us that photographs are a visual medium and that they capture a visual slice "*of* reality or nature",[4] the very thing Cavell has specified at the beginning of the second chapter as that what a photograph is of in the most general sense. However, Cavell says more: "[W]e cannot say that a photograph reproduces a sight (or a look, or an appearance)".[5]

At the core of this objection is the claim that there is an asymmetry between photographs and sound recordings:

> "The problem is not that photographs are not visual copies of objects, or that objects can't be visually copied. The problem is that even if a photograph were a copy of an object, so to speak, it would not bear the relation to its object that a recording bears to the sound it copies".[6]

> "'When I say, listening to a record, 'That's an English horn,' what I really mean is, 'That's the *sound* of an English horn'; [...] *what* I hear is exactly the same (ontologically the same, and if my equipment is good enough, empirically the same) whether the thing is present or not.' What this rigmarole calls attention to is that sounds can be perfectly copied [...] It is interesting that there is no comparable rigmarole about visual transcripts."[7]

I seriously doubt the validity of a number of claims Cavell makes here. When looking at a photograph, what is wrong with saying "That's an *image* of your mother," where "image", I remind once again, does not include the physical medium? Perhaps the problem is of an ontological nature,

[3] As Noël Carroll astutely observes, this privileging of reality over fiction is a consequence of Bazin's ontological commitments as well. See Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 148-152.

[4] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 16, italics in the original.

[5] Ibid. 19.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid. Italics in the original.

perhaps the image captured in the photograph is not ontologically identical to the object that is your mother. It is certainly not but that is not what I was claiming. I am talking about the mother's *image* and not mother. Perhaps then the problem is that this image is not identical to the light which bounced of the object photographed (and ended up causing the chemical reaction on the photosensitive film material) in the sense Cavell alleges the sound of a recording to be to its source. But what does this ontological identity amount to in the case of sound reproductions? It cannot be the case that the sound reproduced from a recording is ontologically identical to the sound vibrations that produced engravings on the surface of a record. If something is a copy then, certainly, it is not ontologically identical to its source. Therefore, the only ontological identity Cavell could be referring to above is that *what* one hears irrespective of the English horn's presence (i.e. irrespective of whether one is attending a concert or listening to a recording) is on both occasions *sound*, the vibrations in the air, and not the horn itself, i.e. the object from whence the sounds emanate. But the same obtains for looking at an object and looking at a photograph. What we on both occasions see is an *image*, a decoding of an electromagnetic wave for the present purposes substantially no different than the decoding of a mechanical wave in the case of hearing. Both waves have their origins in (more) tangible objects. In that sense, it is true that photograph does not make a copy of an object (your mother), but it does make a copy of the image of that object, i.e. of the visual sense-data the object affords. In other words, the crux of the alleged asymmetry is that Cavell is willing to call sounds (i.e. mechanical waves) objects, but unwilling to call images (i.e. electromagnetic waves) the same, i.e. reserving "object" only for entities such as mother or Grand Canyon. If ordinary language use is the reason for claiming no aforementioned rigmarole exists for visual transcripts, then I am afraid this is an occasion where it obfuscates far more than it reveals.[8]

But there appears to be another reason why Cavell insists that an asymmetry between photographs and sound recordings obtains – viz. empiri-

[8] I suspect that if we were creatures which gathered most of our information about our surroundings aurally rather than visually Cavell would be more willing to identify electromagnetic waves as objects. At the same time, I suspect he would refuse the status to sound ones.

cal. Cavell claims that whereas there are occasions where we cannot tell a record of a sound apart from the sound recorded this is never the case for a photograph of an object and the object photographed:

> "[W]e are not going to say that photographs provide us with the sense-data of the objects they contain, because if the sense-data of photographs were the same as the sense-data of the objects they contain, we couldn't tell a photograph of an object from the photograph itself".[9]

If this means that the objects in photographs always come with the surrounding visual field then that does not seem that interesting. For it is a fact that a sound recording records an aural field as much as an optical recording records a visual field. The important difference is only that there exists neutral aural information – silence – which we regularly perceive as absence whereas there is no neutral visual information which we regularly perceive as absence.

Moreover, the empirical discrepancy has also to do with the asymmetry between the reception of visual and aural recordings. When listening to a reproduction of a recorded sound one does not require a surface but space.[10] This is why as long as we are positioned in space and specific calibrations are made we can easily confuse the recorded sound for its live counterpart. This is also why we could theoretically confuse a hologram of an object for that object. This reveals another similarity that spatial reproductions share with one another – the absence of frame. In direct contrast, photographs and films, on top of being two-dimensional, have an easily identifiable frame making it even more unlikely for somebody to confuse them for the real thing. What is important to note is that the possible confusion between a sound record and its live counterpart is by no means a criterion for claiming that photographs cannot record images (or sights, or visual fields, or visual arrays, or sense-data, or electromagnetic waves). Ontologically speaking then, photographs record objects as

[9] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 19.

[10] "Reproduction" is meant as the process of playing a recorded sound or picture. "Recording" is meant as the process of capturing a given sound or sight, image, electromagnetic wave, visual field, etc.

much as sounds do. The only thing is that these objects are both particular types of waves and not what traditional physics would call hard bodies. Moreover, what usually distinguishes photographs from images they record are the photographs' empirical and phenomenological traits deriving from the special relation of the object of interest to its visual field, and the fact that the reproduction of visual recordings takes place on framed two-dimensional surfaces.

2. The Myth of the Ontologically Privileged Cinema

In the same chapter, still convinced that only hard bodies deserve the status of visual objects, Cavell invokes Bazin's comparison of photographs to moldings and imprints, only to dismiss it quickly thereafter:

> "I feel like saying: Objects are too *close* to their sights to give them up for reproducing; in order to reproduce sights they (as it were) make, you have to reproduce *them*–make a mold, or take an impression. [...] My dissatisfaction with the idea is, I think, that physical molds and impressions and imprints have clear procedures for getting *rid* of their originals, whereas in a photograph, the original is still as present as it ever was."[11]

Having demonstrated, however, that the original is not what Cavell believes it to be, rather one of its properties (e.g. the electromagnetic waves produced by photons bouncing of a hard body like Grand Canyon), the comparison to imprints is certainly worth investigating. An even greater reason is that the comparison has enjoyed tremendous success in film studies and has given rise to index theory which informs a number of discussions ranging from film style to questions surrounding the alleged death of the cinema resulting from the advent of digital technologies.

Index theory, as it is usually articulated in film studies starting with Peter Wollen' *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* regards the photograph to be an index within one of Charles S. Peirce's trichotomy of signs – the other

[11] Ibid. 20, italics in the original.

two being the icon and the symbol.[12] Whereas an icon in some way resembles what it represents (e.g. a drawing of a man is an icon of that man), and a symbol represents by way of convention (e.g. 'cat' stands for cat by virtue of linguistic convention as much as 'die Katze' does), an index bears an existential relation to what it represents. This means that the existence of an index guarantees the existence of what it is an index of, at least at the moment in time when the causal process which produced the index began. Thus, a photograph of your car guarantees that at the time the photograph was made there was such a thing as your car (which is not to deny that this photograph is at the same time an icon of the very same car). On this account, a drawing of your car, on the other hand, does not guarantee the same for it might have been drawn from memory long after you've sold the car or, perhaps, you might have just misremembered ever having a car. With this in mind, the standard account of index theory would say that animated and digital cinema is not indexical whereas traditional photographic cinema (as long the film track was not tampered with) is.

Certainly, not all of the claims derivable from index theory may be found in Bazin, and some of them might even be directly contradicted by other things he says. There are, however, at least two crucial points on which index theorists and Bazin (as well as Cavell) agree. The first is that photographic films (which have not been tampered with) bear a special ontological relation to reality. For Bazin this relation is expressed in terms of a molding or an imprint, and for later film scholars in terms of an index.[13] The second is that drawings and paintings do not bear that special ontological relation to reality – for index theorists and Cavell this also obtains in the case of animated cinema.[14]

I will dedicate only a few words to the second point. It is important to note that in order for an index theorist to make this move, she needs

[12] Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 122-126.

[13] Another way for accounting this special relation has been developed under the name of transparency thesis. For details see Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984), 246-277.

[14] Whether this stance on animated cinema is attributable to Bazin as well remains unclear.

to invoke automatism. The relation of indexicality does not suffice for a painting of a car made while looking at the car would still count as an index of that car according to Peirce. Moreover, to say that a still from *Bambi* has no special ontological relation to reality, whereas a still from *The Maltese Falcon* does, confuses or deliberately obfuscates the terms of relation. A still from *Bambi* is an index of whatever was in front of the camera at the time when the still was made as much as a still from *The Maltese Falcon* is an index of whoever was in front of the camera during shooting. The only difference is that in *Bambi* it was a drawing that is in front of the camera, whereas in *The Maltese Falcon* it was the set and actors on it. If, at this point, an index theorist pointed out that the content of the still from *Bambi* had no indexical relation to whatever it depicts, say, Bambi running through the forest that would certainly be true for there never existed such and such white-tailed deer called Bambi. But the same holds for *The Maltese Falcon* – there never existed such and such a person called Sam Spade. As for Cavell, I can only say that his elimination of animation from the category of movies is ill advised, if for nothing else then because of the denial of ordinary language use he puts so much faith into. Answering "I saw *Bambi*" to a question "What film did you see?" is perfectly proper.

Let us now turn to the first point of agreement between Bazin, Cavell and index theorists, one we might call the myth of the ontologically privileged cinema. This myth rests on the idea that, according to index theorists, photographs are indices of phenomena in front of the camera, and that, according to Bazin, photographs are moldings or imprints of those very same phenomena: "One might consider photography in this sense as a molding, the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light".[15] Although I agree that some photographs have that special relation to reality index theorists, Bazin and Cavell speak of, there are those which do not and it is precisely those that virtually all of the people look at when watching films. In other words, only negatives or other initial products of photography are moldings or imprints *of the reality in front of the camera.* All other photographs deriving from these, let us call them secondary ones, are not. The reason for my claim boils down to the fact that "being

[15] Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol 1*, 12.

a molding/imprint of" is not a transitive relation. In other words, if B is a molding/imprint of A, and C is a molding/imprint of B, then it does not follow that C is a molding/imprint of A.

To drive the point home let us exchange the variables for concrete examples. Imagine we take a piece of wax and push our finger through it leaving a gaping hole in the shape of our finger. Clearly we have produced an imprint *of our finger*. But let us now take this piece of wax, remove all of the wax surrounding the hole except for a thin foil around the hole and use this three-dimensional wax surface to push into an even more malleable material, say silicone. We have produced another imprint and this time it is an imprint *of the wax*. The question is: is the imprint *of the wax* in the silicone also an imprint *of our finger*? If we have been successful in making the wax foil thin enough then the two imprints will be (almost) identical in size and shape so in a sense it *is* an imprint of our finger. But at the same time it is *not* an imprint of our finger in the sense that our finger was never in contact with the silicone a hole in which now bears the resemblance to the finger. So which one of the two better fits the italicized sense of being an imprint *of our finger*? I believe the former does because the less successful we are in keeping the second imprint resemble the first one the less likely we are to call the silicon imprint the imprint of our finger at all. On the other hand, regardless of how jittery we were when pushing our finger into the wax, or, perhaps, we even deliberately made concentric circles by swirling our finger in it, the resulting hole in the wax would still be an imprint of our finger for it was our finger that made it. And it is this other quality that is of crucial importance for Bazin:

> "No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction".[16]

As we can see the similarity between the model and the image of the photograph does not play a role in the special relation that obtains between the two.

The problem as it pertains to the photograph and films Bazin and Cavell speak of can now clearly be identified by anybody who knows that

[16] Ibid. 14.

the initial product of a standard camera is a negative. A positive is made by virtue of photographic printing. The similar procedure also holds for photographic film where negative is printed onto a transparent film stock. Thus what Cavell and Bazin were effectively looking at was an equivalent of mold/imprint C (the silicone) and not of mold/imprint B (the wax). The logical conclusion here would then be that they have confused a picture in a film to bear special ontological relation to what was in front of the camera whereas in fact it only bears special ontological relation to the negative (which then bears a special ontological relation to what was in front of the camera).

Whereas the problem with Bazin and Cavell is that they did not realize that the relation of "being a molding/imprint of" is not necessarily transitive, the problem with index theorists is precisely the obverse – they are unable to stop the unwanted consequences the transitivity of indexicality leads to. Consider the following. The negative guarantees the existence of the object photographed. The positive guarantees the existence of the negative and in doing so guarantees the existence of the object photographed. OK, so far so good. But imagine I set the photograph in question on fire causing a fire alarm to go off in the process. On this account both the smoke and the fire alarm are indices of the object photographed. For an index theorist this does not appear to be the most felicitous result. At the very least they would have to admit that the smoke and the sound of the fire alarm in question do not bear the special ontological relation to the object photographed Bazin had in mind. Or consider a different scenario. A child is an index of her mother. But then, by the logic of transitivity the photograph of that child should also be an index of her mother. Again consequences Bazin would hardly approve of. It appears then that index theory covers far more than Bazin would care for.[17]

[17]There is certainly more to be said about this. It might be possible to deny the transitivity of indexicality by arguing that there is more to indexicality than the causal guarantee of existential relations. One way would be to say that the index and what it is an index of had to have been spatiotemporally co-present at the time at which the process which caused the index began. Another way might be to insist that indexicality obtains only when the causal connection is not causally indeterminate. However, no index theorists has even recognized the need for this.

3. Absent from What?

One of Cavell's main ontological claims and the one which closes the second chapter of the book is the following: "The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it".[18] This I believe hits the mark but not for reasons Cavell spells out, i.e. not for what he eventually makes it to mean. According to him it is the automatism that assures one's absence from what a photograph is of, and, by extension, of the world of a photographic film:

> "In viewing a movie my helplessness is mechanically assured: I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory)."[19]

What is particularly striking here is that for Cavell the moviegoer has a temporal relation to the happening, namely that it has happened in the moviegoer's past. It is worth quoting the following passage at length:

> "I have said elsewhere that in a theater we do not occupy the same space as the actors on a stage but that we do occupy the same time. That is rather superficial. But I have been told that it is obviously false: in a theater we obviously are in the same room as the actors, whereas at a movie we obviously are not. That idea comes from wrong pictures of how the spaces can be entered. It imagines that you could enter the actors' space in a theater by crossing the footlights. But of course all you would accomplish would be to stop the performance. And it imagines that you cannot enter the world of a movie because breaking through the screen is of no use. [...] The actors are *there,* all right, in your world, but to get to them you have to go where they are, and in fact, as things stand, you cannot go there *now.* Their space is not metaphysically different; it is the same human space mine is. And you are not, as in a theater, forbidden to cross the line between actor and incarnation, between action and passion, between profane and sacred realms. In a movie house, the barrier to the stars is time."[20]

[18] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 23.
[19] Ibid. 26.
[20] Ibid. 155, italics in the original.

As we can see more ontological commitments are made explicit here. Although we do not occupy the same time as actors do, we do occupy the same ontological space as they do. The case of the theater, on the other hand, presents us with the obverse ontological relations. During theater performance we do not occupy the same ontological space as the actors do but we do occupy the same time.

I believe that here Cavell slides time and again between what actors are performing – call it a fictional world – and their spatiotemporal coordinates within our own world. As it appears that Cavell understands fiction in terms of fictional worlds in the sense of self-contained units populated by a number of 'doubles' from the actual world as Gérard Genette, David Lewis, Lubomir Doležel, and Thomas Pavel do, and not in institutional terms of games of make-believe as Kendall Walton does, I will only point to some inconsistencies in Cavell's claims, and not argue in favor of one of the models for understanding fiction.[21] With this in mind, I will discuss three types of access worlds afford us: psychological, temporal and spatial. My ontological claim is that in order to have a minimally coherent view of a fictional world Cavell implies, as long as we are only spectators and not performers of, it can afford us only psychological access. The actual world, on the other hand, affords us all three types of access. This means that although I can have knowledge of a fictional event or empathize with a fictional character I can have no temporal and spatial relation to them. For what would count as having spatiotemporal access to Sherlock Holmes? Finally, this also means that all of the objects populating the fictional world, regardless of whether they can be identified in the actual world by means of some Kripkean rigid designation or not, are self-contained within that fictional world. In other words, we enjoy no spatiotemporal relation to objects such as the 19th century London to be found in the stories about Sherlock Holmes.

[21] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 212-215. David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Lubomir Doležel, "Possible Worlds of Fiction and Theory," *New Literary History* 29(4) (1998), 785-809; Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

Cavell is completely right when he says that we do not inhabit the same space as the actors on stage do. For they are performing a fictional world and thus to encroach on the stage would only cause that world to vanish. We could not enter the fictional world merely by stepping onto the stage. But it seems an odd idea that a fictional world has a fictional space but not a fictional time. Certainly, it is not only the fictional space that vanishes once an intrusion is made but the whole world. And this world is not made up only of space and the beings in the world but of time as well. The claim might then be that the fictional time and our time coincide in duration, that they are the same in that respect, i.e. that the duration of an hour in the fictional world equals an hour in our own. But even if that were always so, and it is easy to think of situations in which that is not the case, coincidence of duration does not amount to ontological identity.[22] This is why it is inconsistent to claim that in theater we do not inhabit the space of the fictional world, but that we do inhabit its time.

But I believe more should be said for I can also say that I do not inhabit the time of the Romans or that I do not inhabit the space under the earth's mantle. What is meant here is that the Roman Empire is in my past and that the earth's mantle is not in the same place as I am. But this is not to say that on a spatiotemporal continuum I cannot position myself in relation to them. And this is exactly what I want to say of time and space of fiction. They are of another world and that world, although I can think and speak of it, and even have feelings about it, cannot be temporally or spatially related to me.

In the case of film fiction Cavell is right about time (but for wrong reasons) and wrong about space. It is true that we are temporally absent but that is not because that time has passed. It is because that time belongs to another world for practically all of the films he refers to are fictional. Moreover, the same ontological space Cavell is writing of is only true on the profilmic level. It is true that the actors inhabit the same ontological space as we do but the fiction on screen is of another order. I am afraid that the relation or non-relation one has to time must be accompanied by the same type of relation or non-relation one has to space (and vice-

[22] For instance a scene in which a fast passage of time is represented: as the heroine sits at a desk the off-stage voice pronounces "in her grief she barely noticed that months were passing..."

versa). This is not only because modern physics teaches us that time is the fourth dimension, but also because our standard phenomenological understanding of time is described in terms of flow. In that sense both time and space are of the same continuous fabric of the world. The problem seems to lie in the fact that although we have different words for space and place we don't have different words for equivalent meanings in the case of time, in spite of the fact that we do clearly make a distinction when we talk about time in general (an equivalent to space), and time of the Romans (an equivalent of place).

In the case of non-fiction the ontological descriptions of temporal and spatial absence still hold, but they do so in a different sense. In fact what Cavell says about time and space of fiction film applies. Non-fiction is of the same space and time and most often of a distinct place and time passed. But it is not really the spatiotemporal dislocation that guarantees my absence nor is it automatism. Rather it is the fact that I cannot interact with these images, i.e. that although I can respond to them they cannot respond to me. That we do not call various interactive animations on our hand-held devices (e.g. unlocking) or computer games films, both of which are automated phenomena in the sense picture-taking is, is a good sign that interactivity rather than spatiotemporal absence or automatism is the key factor in distinguishing between the two and films.

4. What Film Is

With all of the above considerations in mind, instead of a conclusion, I would like to propose an ontological account of what a film is, or, more precisely, what we have called film up to now (with a brief explanation of why it is a better definition than one of the most recent and influential ones proposed). Note this proposal rejects any notions of special ontological relations to reality, gives an account of various historical screening practices, replaces spatiotemporal absence with interactivity, and allows for both fiction and non-fiction. Films are recordings of images which are 1) screened, 2) performed from a storage medium, 3) posses temporal duration, and 4) afford no interaction.

Noël Carroll's alternative is as follows.[23] Films are recordings of im-

[23] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden, Oxford: Blackwell Publish-

ages which 1) allow for no orientation towards their content, 2) make the impression of movement technically possible, 3) their token performances (screenings) are generated by template types which are stored as tokens (storage media), 4) their performances are not art works, and 5) they are two-dimensional.

First, note that Carroll and I articulate a number of same things but put emphasis on different aspects. For instance, as Carroll rightly points out, the movement of the images is *not* a necessary condition to call a piece of visual recording a film for there have been films like *La jetée* in which (almost) no movement is discernable. Moreover, a recording consisting solely of a completely static image growing brighter or dimmer would still count as film. Therefore, my third necessary condition – temporal duration – substitutes for Carroll's second condition – the possibility of movement.[24] My second condition – storage medium – hones down Carroll's third and fourth to their bare essentials. As the goal of these was to distinguish between forms such as shadow plays and films, I believe recourse to the storage medium is sufficient. Moreover, I am not sure Carroll's condition four obtains for there is the case of *24 Hour Psycho*, a famous contemporary artwork by Douglas Gordon which is nothing but a projection of Alfred Hitchock's *Psycho* slowed down to a speed in which it takes 24 hours for the film to come to an end.[25] My first condition does the heavy lifting of Carroll's fifth but goes a bit further insofar it eliminates flip books and optical toys from the class of film. This is because in flip books and optical toys images are not *screened* upon the surface, but *are* on the surface. Whereas Carroll wants to keep them inside the category of film because of their ordinary language affinity to the heading of "moving images" and the principles behind the generation of the moving image which they share with film, I want to discount them because of the standard historical notion that the birth of cinema begins only with the projection of the image.

ing, 2008), 53-79.

[24] Although Carroll's condition clearly entails temporal duration, I believe that my condition is more elegant because Carroll's effectively says that something may but need not take place – a curios form for a necessary condition.

[25] We might also want to call screenings *together* with their musical accompaniments films as well. This would allow for each performance to be both unique and an artwork. New film history studies go in that direction.

The key distinction, however, lies in my elimination of interaction as opposed to Carroll's discussion of images which do not afford orientation, i.e. detached images. I believe that Carroll is simply wrong to include detached images among his conditions because in a number of experimental films, there is either no content to orientate towards to begin with or the content allows for orientation very easily. Depending on our perspective one of the two obtains in the case of at least some films which were made without shooting anything in front of the camera. If my experimental film consists of nothing but scratches on the celluloid track it is not that these scratches designate any place in the real world. The same obtains if, using exclusively digital technologies, I make a film not unlike a screen saver or a music equalizer in which various forms morph into one another. On both occasions, there is no real-world content represented I could even begin to orientate myself towards.

Perhaps this is not really a problem for Carroll. Perhaps detached images are meant not only to cover instances of photographs with profilmic sources but the ones I discuss as well. Carroll might reply that the images are still detached *precisely because* there is nothing to orientate towards. It is more important that no orientation is possible than whether there is any *profilmic* content to orientate towards or not.

Let us allow for this response. But then we are also free to look at the images in question from a different perspective. If there is no profilmic content as is the case in my experimental films that does not mean that there is no content at all. The content is whatever is on the screen, a line, a dot, a fuzzy blot. And precisely because these visual objects represent nothing in the profilmic we are free to regard them as two-dimensional visual objects in themselves, much like shadows. It is true that I would only end up touching the screen if I were to reach out to touch them, but that does not mean I cannot orientate myself towards them. In fact it takes exactly as much effort as orientating oneself towards the screen. And to object by saying that I can only have spatiotemporal relations towards three-dimensional objects is clearly wrong, for one can hardly deny shadows allow for spatiotemporal relations towards them.[26]

[26] Animation might present another case against detached-images depending on what the supposed focus of orientation is. In *Bambi* are we supposed to orientate towards Bambi (impossible), the drawing of Bambi that was once in front of the camera (what we

We should understand that Carroll's introduction of detached images is motivated more as criticism of Walton's understanding of some of Bazin's and Cavell's ontological claims – viz. that the hard bodies we see in images are in some sense *literally* there – than as a search for necessary conditions that make something a film.[27] That much is clear from the fact that Carroll admits that there are exceptions he cannot accommodate for under the detached images condition. For instance, there are recordings which are clearly films yet allow for orientation – viz. immediately performed live-surveillance cameras recordings to be found in underground stations. Witnessing one of those I can easily spot objects on screen and orientate myself towards them as I stand in the station. But under my set of conditions these films are allowed for. The lack of interactivity does not pose a problem here, for surveillance recordings of this type are no more interactive than, say, documentary films. Just because they are screened at virtually the same time they are made does not make them interactive. For them to be interactive images have to give an impression that they *themselves* respond to our actions in the sense images in video games elicit that impression. Moreover, in that very same sense manipulations of the image such as increased or decreased playing speed or choosing between alternative endings while watching DVD editions also do not amount to interaction with the image.

So there we have it. We have come some way from Cavell's "material basis of the media of movies" described as "*a succession of automatic world projections*", but I believe we have still managed to give an ontological account of what film is with recourse to medium only.[28]

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are unable to do), or on-screen lines and colors that make up Bambi (easily)?

[27] Walton, "Transparent Pictures".

[28] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 72, italics in the original.

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