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# ***Medium and Materiality: Stanley Cavell's Naïvist Theory of Art***

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ABSTRACT. Finding a proper account of the relationship between the medium of a visual work of art (in its aesthetic sense) and its materiality remains one of the most intractable problems of philosophical aesthetics. This paper attempts to make some progress with this problem by arguing that Stanley Cavell develops such an argument implicitly in his early writings. The first part will present the general structure of the materiality argument as I take it to be internal to Cavell's work. In the second part the paper I will relate this problematic to Cavell's identification of film and philosophy. I will show that there is indeed such an identification at work in Cavell, and that this allows us, for instance, to consider the way film engages with works of traditional art to be philosophical statements about those works, and hence as potentially establishing aesthetic claims (including the materiality of their media). Relying further on Cavell's theory of the role of perspective in traditional art, as well as Tarkovsky's filmic treatment of Quattrocento painting, Cavell's fundamental insight about the materiality of the medium is relied on to show how the artificial separation of Quattrocento perspectivism and Modernism can be overcome in favor of a naïve approach that emphasizes the identity of the medium of art with its physical basis.

## **1. Introduction**

*My complaint against the complaint against me to the effect that I am naïve about reality is that it is naïve about reality.* (Stanley Cavell)

*Pour échapper à l'horreur de ces apostasies philosophiques, je me suis orgueilleusement résigné à la modestie; je me suis contenté de sentir; je suis revenue chercher un asile dans l'impeccable naïveté.* (Charles Baudelaire)

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*The classification of works of art into naïve and sentimental might perhaps be fruitfully applied to criticism as well. There are sentimental critiques that lack only a vignette and a motto in order to be perfectly naïve.* (Friedrich Schlegel)

This essay argues that the theory of the medium Stanley Cavell develops in *The World Viewed* in connection with the aesthetics of film also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to what Cavell in that book calls “traditional art.” One important consequence of this fact is that, on Cavell’s view, the medium of a traditional art form (my focus will be on painting) should be regarded as identical with its “physical basis.” I think of both Cavell’s theory, and its consequence as to the materiality of the media of art-works, as true, original, and important, but I will not be arguing directly for these claims. Instead, I will focus on establishing that Cavell is indeed committed to holding the views mentioned. This mode of proceeding calls for some explanation as it leaves open the question of why such an identification could be important for Cavell in terms of what it implies about the medium as an aesthetic concept.

What such a question about importance seems to call for is an answer to the further question: ‘What does it mean to say that the physical basis of an art is also its medium?’ What this latter question makes clear, however, is that it depends on a prior one: ‘What does it mean to say that something is a medium of art?’<sup>1</sup> It is because Cavell would like the answer to this latter question to take a particular form that he affirms his original thesis about the “physical basis” of film in *The World Viewed*, namely that that physical basis is identical with film’s medium.<sup>2</sup> In the case of film, this will mean that critical readings will inevitably discover that films achieve their critical depth in part by making aspects of their physical media, i.e., photography, significant. In other words, the form which Cavell would

<sup>1</sup> It is more or less in this form that the question first makes its appearance in Cavell’s ‘*A Matter of Meaning It.*’ (Cavell 2002), p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> Cavell defines the “physical basis” of film as a “succession of automatic world projections”, by analogy with painting being based on such a physical basis. Cf.: “The material basis of the media of movies (as paint on a flat, delimited support is the material basis of the media of painting) is [...] a succession of automatic world projections.” (Cavell 1979b), p.72. Examples for Cavell’s identifying of the medium with its physical basis are provided below in Subsection 2.3. of this paper.



like the answer to the question about the medium to take is one, in turn, which requires close engagement with individual works of art to count as an answer in particular cases, as it is only by such close reading, according to Cavell, that one may uncover or experience the identity of film with aspects of the physical medium that have been made significant by that particular film. (Any aspect may potentially count, and must therefore be tested, as we will see in what follows.) Because the claim about identity is an aesthetic, and hence, philosophical claim, Cavell would also like the answer to this question to confirm that the close-reading of film as practiced in *Pursuits of Happiness*, the sequel to *The World Viewed*, should count as a *sui generis* and legitimate philosophical activity, and one which should be much more widely practiced as a part of doing philosophy. (All of these issues are explored in much more detail in Part 2. of this paper.)

In the light of the above, I can restate the goal of this paper as one of demonstrating that Cavell is committed to the applicability of this way of engaging with films to traditional art-works, and painting in particular, (which is what engaging with their media means), and that this form of engagement is based on, and implies the materiality of those media.

The primary difficulties with the accomplishment of this goal are two-fold.

The first difficulty is that within *The World Viewed*, which is Cavell's most focused attempt at developing the theory of the medium of art (in response to such a need identified in his earlier writings), attention is restricted entirely to film and a narrow selection of works of American Abstract Expressionist painters. The second difficulty arises from the complementary fact, that although Cavell develops his theory of the filmic medium as photographic by reference to Western painting, he does not, apart from a few side remarks in footnotes, engage in any "readings" of individual works of classical painting at all (nor sculpture, for that matter) in relation to film. (For the purposes of the present essay I will use "classical" to designate works of Western painting beginning with Giotto as theorized by Vasari, and culminating with works created in the wake of Manet's establishing of modernism as theorized by Michael Fried in *Manet's Sources* – i.e., old masters and early Modernism preceding the Cubist turn towards

abstraction.)<sup>3</sup> Insofar as classical painting figures in *The World Viewed* – as it does explicitly and implicitly in several important ways – it does so under the general heading of something Cavell calls “traditional art.”<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the first difficulty, we need to consider that it is only an attenuated sense that one may say about either film, or the paintings Cavell considers that they have material media in the sense traditional painting has one. Film, as Cavell says, is “as light as light” – the object that is the work of art is not a material object in the sense in which traditional art objects are, or at any rate not identical with it.<sup>5</sup> The problem with the works of the painters invoked by Cavell: Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella, by contrast, is that strictly speaking, they are not *made* in a sense a traditional painting is.<sup>6</sup> This is part of their aesthetic purpose: they each involve a denial of the human gesture, the significance of the human hand engaged in working the material medium, they do not result from a process of exploring the resistance of the material (Wollheim). In other words, the media Cavell does consider, whether of film or painting, are distinguished from the media of traditional art precisely by the way they dis-encourage, or even repel consideration of their own materiality.

From what I said about Cavell’s motivation for raising the problem of the medium, it should be obvious why Cavell’s own lack of engagement with works of “traditional art” should pose a further obstacle, a second difficulty for the goal I set for this paper. Cavell’s aesthetics is fundamentally particularist – and subject to the principle he calls the “empirical dis-

<sup>3</sup> This characterization is far from being innocuous (it ignores placing Cézanne as a point of transition, for instance), but as a local definition establishing a frame of reference for the purposes of discussion, it is also harmless. It also seeks to remain neutral with respect to the vexed question of the correctness of Clement Greenberg’s theory of modernism (which, by the way, Cavell rejects on more than one occasion. Cf., for instance (Cavell 2007). For Fried’s account, see (Fried 1996).

<sup>4</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p.24.

<sup>5</sup> This “possibility of the medium” has been most interestingly and elegantly exploited in recent work by Tarantino in *Inglorious Basterds* by making the relationship between the film and reels on which it is recorded critically significant. I will not be discussing the token-type issue in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. III. (See the chapter: ‘Excursus: Some Modernist Painting’)

covery of the *a priori*.”<sup>7</sup> Insofar as general laws of the medium exist at all, they need to be discovered in and by critical readings of works of art that have proven their “importance,” by having received proper critical appraisal within an equally canonical critical literature. I will expand on the importance of all of these points in the course of this paper. For the moment, what matters is that Cavell himself offers us not a single example for how one may go about applying his theory of the filmic medium to works of traditional art. It is partly for this reason that I will be following an odd strategy in my paper, which is as follows.

In Subsections 2.2-2.4 of the first part of the paper I will present the general structure of the materiality argument as I take it to be internal to Cavell’s work. This will involve presenting some evidence that Cavell is indeed committed to holding explicitly that the media of works of art in general is identical with their physical basis. I will then go on to discuss my own suggestion of “naïve realism” as a possible aesthetic attitude to artworks, a version of which I would like to attribute to Cavell. In the second part the paper I will then turn to a seemingly unrelated issue, namely Cavell’s identification of film and philosophy. I will show that there is indeed such an identification at work in Cavell, and that this allows us, for instance, to consider the way film engages with works of traditional art to be philosophical statements about those works, and hence as potentially establishing aesthetic claims. In the third part of my paper I will then apply this principle to Andrei Tarkovsky’s filmings of Renaissance paintings, and argue that Tarkovsky’s films are best understood on the basis of Cavell’s film aesthetics, and hence that Tarkovsky films establish the materiality claim with respect to a number of Renaissance paintings in terms of a contrarian reading of their use of perspective. My focus will be in particular on Tarkovsky’s interpretation in *Nostalghia* of the medium of Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto*. I suggest that it is possible to understand Tarkovsky’s reading of this painting as in turn a representative Cavellian reading of a representative work of Italian Quattrocento art.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

## 2. Naïve Realism

### 2.1. *Materiality and Art-Restoration*

The strategy followed in showing how Cavell is committed to holding the claim about the materiality of the medium serves a further purpose, namely to raise a question about why a seemingly obvious fact about paintings (namely that they are material entities) is also one of the most difficult facts philosophically to establish, or acknowledge about them. I would like to illustrate this by an example that is slightly activist in purpose, but nevertheless a theoretical one.

It seems that the only available philosophical position in favor of a strong notion of preservation as opposed to restoration of works of art is formulated in terms of “rights”, as opposed to the aesthetic value of preserving the work’s appearance.<sup>8</sup> The problem seems to be that no philosophical defense can be offered that is strong enough to counter the crude argument of the restoration establishment to the effect that because aesthetic judgment is “subjective,” restorers must (and can) rely on increasingly sophisticated scientific procedures to assert what belongs to the original hand of the artist, and what doesn’t. Aesthetic arguments are simply disqualified from playing any role in informing the disastrous cleaning and restoration campaigns to which some of the most important works of the Western canon have been subjected in recent years.

To return to my point about the indirect strategy followed in this paper, part of its usefulness lies in shedding some light on the difficulties with developing a philosophical claim in favor of a strong notion of preservation. As I hope to show, the main difficulty is that Cavell’s position not only implies that it is nonsensical to identify any physical aspect of a work of art as belonging, or not belonging to it, in the absence of aesthetic/critical evaluation, but that this identification according to Cavell must be conducted in and by a form of conversation that denies any critical advantage awarded to scholarly or disciplinary expertise on the part of its participants.

Although this last point can only be supported properly by the entirety

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<sup>8</sup> See, (Beck and Daley 1996), also as the source of the ensuing comments in this paragraph.

of the argument of this paper, I would like to cite a few passages showing that Cavell is indeed committed to holding some such position, if and when we are willing to think about the media of classical painting (and sculpture, for that matter) by analogy with the medium of film. Cavell writes:

I say, in effect, that *any and every gesture of the camera may or may not mean something*, and every cut and every rhythm of cuts, and every frame and every inflection within a frame – something determined by the nature of film and by the specific context in which the gesture occurs in a particular film. I call such possibilities of the physical medium of film its automatisms. They are the bearer's of the filmmaker's intentions – like syntactical or lexical elements of a language. Unlike speakers of a language, film-makers<sup>9</sup> can construct not merely, as it were, new sentences, but new elements of sentences. *This intentionality of film's automatisms dictates the perspective from which a critical understanding of a film must proceed.*<sup>10</sup>

Although Cavell talks specifically about film, I think it is quite obvious when one puts it together with how he uses a concept of “traditional art” that he intends to describe a property of any medium of art, a property we might describe as relationally saturated. In any case, if the property of the medium identified here is real, it follows, on condition that the medium of a painting is material, that restoration cannot be based on scientific observation. And this is not merely or simply because of the reason that every

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<sup>9</sup> What are – by analogy – the bearer's of a painter's intentions? First of all, I think Cavell is right that we need first to decide whether a particular gesture is significant or not. So we cannot know this *a priori*. But the point is that in a painting *everything* is deliberate, even if some of the things can be legitimately called automatisms (a term from *The World Viewed* which I discuss in Part 3.). It is within these “automatisms” that the painter makes decisions, and then executes them – partly not knowing what the result will be, or, rather, the result being the result of an interaction. It is Andrew Harrison who has developed the fullest account of the “non-justificatory” conception of rationality involved in the process of making. (Harrison 1978), see esp. Ch. 2. ‘*Thought in Action and Thought About Action*’ (and Ch. 5 ‘*Designing While Making*’).

<sup>10</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 186. My emphasis. Cf., Cavell: “Good directors know how to mean everything they do. Great directors mean more – more completely, more subtly, more specifically – and they discover how to do everything they mean.” Ibid., p. 188. Cavell is relying on a conception of intentionality fully developed in his earlier essay, “*A Matter of Meaning It.*”

detail might matter<sup>11</sup>, but because of the view of the medium that is implied by this quote, which is probably the heart of Cavell's theory, namely that *you cannot know* what a medium of art is without assuming the intentionality of the work of art. Accessing this intentionality is a matter of engaging with the work of art in an interpretative mode for Cavell, which is also experimental, and whose results may actually change. Here is what he says about criticism as an experiment:

The conditions of the aesthetic power of film, as with the exercise of any human power, cannot be known in advance of a certain criticism, or say critique, of that power, and a conviction in the architectonic of the critique – a satisfaction in the placement of concepts within the structure of importance – is not had apart from its application in individual cases. Sciences call such application experimentation; humanities call it criticism. If we say that what organizes or animates the results of experimentation is mathematical discourse, then we might say that what organizes or animates the results of criticism is philosophical discourse.<sup>12</sup>

As I mentioned, my hope is that the reason why these seemingly common-sense insights about art and materiality are as difficult to articulate by philosophy, as to accept for non-philosophers, will emerge precisely by an understanding of how these views about the filmic medium apply to works of traditional art based on Cavell's own argument.

## 2.2. Naïve Realism as Aesthetic Attitude

The goal of this subsection is to develop a general sense of what is implied for Cavell's philosophy of art as a whole by the assertion that

[...] in a philosophical frame of mind one says that a medium of an art is the physical basis of that art (e.g., that the medium of painting is paint, and the medium of writing is words, and the medium of music is sound [...]).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf., Cavell: "The moral of art, as of life, is that you do not know in advance what may arise as significant detail." (Cavell 1979b), p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> (Cavell 1985), p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p.105.

My aim will be to show, first, that this claim is in earnest, that it means what it says, and, second, that it is a component of a philosophical position about the materiality of the medium I am here attributing to Cavell.<sup>14</sup> This latter position is one that justifies what I propose to call a form of naïve realism within our normal mode of engagement with artworks, towards their materiality in general, and towards the way materiality functions in classical painting in particular. In essence, the view comprises two separable claims: first, that according to Cavell, any genuine engagement with a work of art qua work of art (both “modernist” and “traditional”) will *ipso facto* constitute, or involve, an acknowledgement of the work’s status as a physical object, and, second, that this acknowledgement is further articulated by the way in which the significance of the work is *accessed* by such an acknowledgement, or rather, that the acknowledgement of the materiality of the work constitutes a definitive element of that access, and is essential to any critical perception. On this view, a work of art comes into being within a physical medium by making certain material aspects of that medium directly meaningful. To quote an incidental remark of Cavell’s neatly summarizing both components as part of a single position: a painting is a “meaningful object in paint”.<sup>15</sup>

Acknowledgment is of course one of the key concepts of Cavell’s philosophy (and of his aesthetics) and its relevance to painting as an art is in turn acknowledged and summed up by the following beautiful passage:

Painting, being art, is revelation; it is revelation because it is acknowledgement; being acknowledgement, it is knowledge, of itself, and of the world.<sup>16</sup>

My goal of articulating Cavell’s identification of the medium with its physical basis can be further articulated in turn as an effort at clarifying the

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<sup>14</sup> I will employ the phrase “naïve realism” both as the description of the attitude (or stance) expressed by the passage cited above (taking it as expressing what we “say” about an experience of the medium as material), and also as the name for the philosophical view confirming the legitimacy of this attitude, and implying its role for critical engagement with works of art that I take to be the heart of the theory. (I propose allowing the ambiguity to take care of itself, unless the context in which I use the term requires more careful articulation.)

<sup>15</sup> (Cavell 1979b), 21.

<sup>16</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 110.

relationship of this identity to Cavell's concept of acknowledgement as pertaining to art in general, and Western painting in particular. As part of this effort, the interpretation of the passage just cited will be the subject of Part 3. of this paper in relation to Andrei Tarkovsky's reading of *Piero della Francesca's Madonna del Parto* in his film *Nostalghia*.

The preceding sketch of Cavell's materiality thesis clearly stands in need of further development if it is to survive a test that I would like claim for it, namely that rather than implying a rejection *überhaupt* of analytical approaches to the ontological identity of works of art, it is in genuine dialogue with them and represents a *sui generis* alternative within the array of approaches to theorizing the medium of art by analytical philosophy

As such it involves a second order claim. Naïve realism as an epistemological position expresses the belief that our primary, everyday relationship to reality, unchallenged by skeptical arguments, is in fact a justified one even in the light of those arguments, and hence it is the one we should adopt reflexively. Naïve realism as an aesthetic conception is also a second order position in that it confirms and transcends the initial encounter with the work as a physical object within the aesthetic attitude, and hence also implies a degree of reflexivity (identifying a work of art as such involves negating, or recognizing its own negation of its "objecthood," to invoke Michael Fried's notion.)<sup>17</sup> However, there is an important difference in naïve realism understood as an aesthetic attitude compared to its epistemic counterpart. The difference consists in the way in which the initial encounter with the work as material object in the epistemic mode returns, or is re-established within aesthetic perception to take the form of an implicit acknowledgement within the aesthetic experiencing of the ways in which the work makes aspects of its material properties *significant*. This implicit acknowledgement may or may not be awarded articulate recognition within the aesthetic experience itself, which suggests one reason why it is meaningful to call it naïve (there are others). It is not in and of itself dependent on such explicit recognition, and it may flow in and out of the process of our conscious aesthetic engagement with the work. It is this meta-stable dynamic of reflexivity and naïveté within the experiencing of works of art as I understand it to be central to Cavell's conception

<sup>17</sup> (Fried 1998), p. 151. Fried developed this idea in conversation with Cavell.



of both philosophy and art that is the focus of Part 2. of this paper.<sup>18</sup>

By suggesting that we treat Cavell's theory of the medium as depending on analytically presentable arguments, I do not mean to suggest that Cavell's development of a philosophical position does not, on his own view, seek to transcend the limits of what can be achieved by analytical philosophy. However, it would be a mistake to regard Cavell's intentions in invoking analytical arguments as somehow ironical in this respect, which is a reading of his work he himself protests against on innumerable occasions. This is not the place to discuss in detail Cavell's efforts to preserve key aspects of analytical philosophy in his thinking. But to give an example that might be helpful for those familiar with Cavell's work, the mistake would be similar to the mistake of regarding the final sentence of Cavell's essay *Knowing and Acknowledging*: "–I know your pain like you do." as if it somehow involved a claim arrived at by the preceding intricate argumentation of that seminal essay, but neither quite following from it *in the mode of that argumentation*, nor quite necessitating it, as if the presence of this closing sentence, introduced as it is in Cavell's text by a hyphen, were a mode of annulation of what went before. If anything, it is more like a peculiar form of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, a term which Cavell himself considers in some ways to be the best description of Wittgenstein's idea of "leading words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use"<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> My finding helpful the deployment of Sartre's concept used by him to explain the ontology of *mauvaise foi* is not meant to suggest that such a form of bad consciousness may be involved in our perception of art for Cavell. Cavell, to my mind would clearly be averse to Sartre's idea as a whole. However, first, the state of consciousness it describes so well evokes Kierkegaard's discussion of innocence in *Repetition* in a way that is relevantly cognate with naïveté understood as a positive attitude involving reflexivity. It seems to me that Cavell's endorsement of certain aspects of Kierkegaard's method in 'Must We Mean What We Say?' furnish sufficient ground for a justified use of this concept as a shorthand. Second, Cavell's own aim to "de-psychologize psychology" in his deployment of the concept of acknowledgement is perhaps most importantly aimed at uncovering the precise dangers which the ever possible withholding of such acknowledgement represents not just for other minds, but the way a work of art invites being treated as a "person." (Cavell 2002), p. 189. (from: 'Music Discomposed') Hence, some form of "bad consciousness" is indeed a threat to our relationship to art for Cavell.

<sup>19</sup> (Cavell 2002), p. xxi. Cf. also Cavell:

I had to describe the accommodation of the new music as one of

While I am ready to admit that Cavell is not entirely helpful in this regard, sometimes branding his own brilliant analytical insights as “rigmarole,” no careful reader of *Knowing and Acknowledging* could possibly take this idea seriously. One way of understanding my attribution of naïve realism as a critical view of art to Cavell would be that this conception of the materiality of the medium stands in a relation to Cavell’s *philosophy* of the medium as whole, *mutatis mutandis*, as the final sentence of ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ stands to the argument of that essay as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

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naturalizing ourselves to a new form of life, a new world. *That a resolution of this sort is described as the solution of a philosophical problem, and as the goal of its particular mode of criticism, represents for me the most original contribution Wittgenstein offers philosophy. I can think of no closer title for it, in an established philosophical vocabulary, than Hegel’s use of the word Aufhebung.* We cannot translate the term: “cancelling,” “negating,” “fulfilling” etc. are all partial, and “sublate” transfers the problem. [...] Of course, we are no longer very apt to suppose, with Hegel, that History will make us a present of it: we are too aware of its brilliant ironies and aborted revolutions for that. But *as an ideal of (one kind of) philosophical criticism* – a criticism in which it is pointless for one side to refute the other, because its cause and topic is the self getting in its own way – it seems about right.” (Cavell 1969a), p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Here are Cavell’s own comments on the “use of the dash”:

“A further idiosyncrasy is especially noticeable in the later essays [of *Must we Mean What We Say*], the use of a dash before sentences. Initial recourse to this device was as a way of avoiding the change of topic (and the necessity for trumped up transitions which a paragraph break would announce, while *registering a significant shift of attitude or voice toward the topic at hand*.)” The plainest use of this device is an explicit return to its old-fashioned employment to mark dialogue. – But there are so many justifications for not writing well.” (Cavell 2002), p. xii.

It is the nature of this shift applied to doing philosophy as a whole that I want to describe in Part 2., as Copernican turn for Cavell in transition to the naïve mode, exemplifying within Cavell’s philosophical procedures the manner in which Cavell intends to make “the problem of the medium of philosophy [...] a significant problem for aesthetics” (Cavell 2002), p. 74.) : the necessity for taking words as they are in a conversational mode wherein

While I therefore think of Cavell's view as representing a *sui generis* alternative to most available treatments of materiality relying on notions of embodiment, I will not be addressing these specific differences in this essay, concentrating instead on the positive articulation of the view itself. However, there is one general aspect of naïve realism as a form of non-reductive aesthetic materialism worth mentioning before getting into details. It is a point related to the point about art-restoration made in Subsection 2.1. of this paper.

Part of the usefulness of the conception of naïve realism lies in its ability to incorporate (or take in stride) a certain mysteriousness about the way works of art emerge in their material media, without either taking that mysteriousness to be obviating the thrust of the claim about materiality altogether<sup>21</sup>, or succumbing to the pressure of ideologizing this mysteriousness. Consider the following passage from *More on the World Viewed* confirming Cavell's interest in maintaining rather than eliminating such mysteriousness:

From [the resonance that Vigo's camera, in *L'Atalante*, with wit, with accuracy, elicits from these temperaments in those actions in these settings at those times] we learn more than we knew of wedding processions, how they can feel like funeral processions, presumably because they commemorate the dying of the bride to her past; we know more precisely and memorably than we had known of the daze and remoteness of brides, of the innocence of grooms, of the daze and remoteness of a husband who recognizes that he has been no husband; we know more certainly that a man wins a beautiful young girl only when he wins her imagination with her; we realize – for the first time or the fiftieth, it makes no difference – that one's responsibility to one's desire is to acknowledge it, and acknowledge its object, i.e., its object's separateness from you. *The power of these last ideas, as they find incarnation in the image of the husband searching under water for his love,*

to understand what the sentence says "...no man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man – unless *wanting to know is a special position*. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers, and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than you yourself". Ibid. p. xiii.

<sup>21</sup> As argued for instance in an important article by Christopher Perricone (Perricone 2007).

*is finally as inexplicable as the power of a phrase of music or of poetry. And the ideas are nothing without that power.*<sup>22</sup>

Two perfectly straightforward analytical theses about the aesthetics of the medium find expression, or acknowledgement, in this passage. One is what one might call a cognitivist view of art, namely that art gives us knowledge (a thesis I will be returning to in relation to Cavell's understanding of Albertian perspective in Part 3.). The second concerns the point at hand, namely that the theory of the medium is not a reductive theory: it will not furnish an explanation (or at any rate no a complete one) of how that meaning arises in the medium. While the passage talks about the medium of *film* (the way ideas find *incarnation* in the image), my analogous point about works of art will be that the acknowledgment of the materiality of their medium in part takes the form of a certain *rational respect* that works of art as physical entities command of us in virtue of producing the effects that they do. As I would further like to claim, this aspect of Cavell's view puts it in direct contrast with what I regard as the liberal-humanistic view of materiality associated with a Hegelian view of art, but perhaps even better exemplified by the following passage from Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education on Man*:

When the artisan lays hands upon the formless mass in order to shape it to his ends, he has no scruple in doing it violence; for the natural material he is working merits no respect for itself, and his concern is not with the whole for the sake of the parts, but with the parts for the sake of the whole. When the artist lays hands upon the same mass, he has just as little scruple in doing it violence; but he avoids showing it. For the material he is handling he has not a whit more respect than has the artisan; but the eye which would seek to protect the freedom of the material he will endeavor to deceive by a show of yielding to his latter. With the pedagogic or the political artist things are very different indeed. For him Man is at once the material on which he works and the goal towards which he strives. In this case the end turns back upon itself and becomes identical with the medium; and it is only inasmuch as the whole serves the parts that the parts are in any way bound to submit too the whole. The

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<sup>22</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 177. *passim*.

statesman-artist must approach his material with a quite different kind of respect from which the maker of Beauty feigns towards his. The consideration he must accord to its uniqueness and individuality is not merely subjective, and aimed at creating an illusion for the senses, but objective and directed to its innermost being.<sup>23</sup>

Ways in which Cavell's position differs from Schiller's will be returned to in Part 3. of this paper.

### **2.3. *The Physical Identity Thesis***

Before expounding further in Part 2. on what the idea of naïve realism involves, I would like to conclude this section by citing some evidence that Cavell is indeed committed to holding at least the first element of the position, namely that one is justified in identifying the medium of an artwork with its physical basis, and that this is a philosophical claim. Although the passage with which I began Subsection 2.2. is taken from a paragraph in *The World Viewed*, the fact that Cavell is consistent (and neither tentative nor ironic) about calling the identification of the medium of art with its physical basis as both *the* philosophical position, and a true one, is confirmed by a number of further facts and claims throughout his early writings.<sup>24</sup> First of all, almost exactly the same formulation, linking a philosophical approach to art with an affirmation of the materiality of its medium, can be found in the very first instance of the problem of the medium making its appearance in Cavell's work, in the essay '*A Matter of Meaning It*' in *Must We Mean What We Say*. In this well-known paragraph (the one most often cited as the most concise statement of Cavell's view of the medium) a further qualification is introduced that seems to challenge the idea of materiality:

[...] What is a medium of art? Philosophers will sometimes say that sound is the medium of music, paint of painting, wood and stone of sculpture, words of literature. One has to find what problems have been thought to reach illumination in such remarks. What needs recognition is that wood or stone would not be a medium of sculpture

<sup>23</sup> (Schiller 1982), pp. 19–21.

<sup>24</sup> I see Cavell's writings as falling into two periods with *The World Viewed* and *Pursuits of Happiness* representing a Copernican turn of sorts.

*in the absence of the art of sculpture.* The home of the idea of a *medium* lies in the visual arts, and it used to be informative to know that a given medium is oil or gouache or tempera or dry point or marble . . . because each of these media had characteristic possibilities, an implied range of handling and result. The idea of a medium is not simply that of a physical material, but of a material-in-certain-characteristic-applications.”<sup>25</sup>

Taken together with further thoughts about the medium in *The World Viewed*, this paragraph is often taken to imply a denial of the materiality of the medium. Here is a characteristic instance of such an interpretation:

Cavell’s reasonable thesis about the media of art, viz., that they only count as media once worked, does not, *as I think he supposes*, obviate the necessity of modernist works declaring their *material* conditions of possibility, indeed twice over.<sup>26</sup>

While I am fundamentally indebted to Bernstein’s brilliant reading of Cavell’s view of materiality, I hope to offer a corrective to this conclusion. In fact, I would be prepared to claim that both Bernstein’s contrarian reading of Anthony Caro’s sculpture in the same essay (devised to challenge both Cavell’s reading as well as that of “his partner in modernist crime,” (Bernstein), i.e. Michael Fried’s), along with Bernstein’s critical reading of pre-modernist works of art in terms of the way they declare their materiality, such as his analysis of Pieter de Hooch’s paintings are readings Cavell would in fact be committed to agreeing with on the very terms of his philosophy of the medium.<sup>27</sup> For the moment, I would like to stay with the Cavell paragraph just cited, and briefly argue that it does not commit

<sup>25</sup> (Cavell 2002), p. 220–21.

<sup>26</sup> (Bernstein 2003), p. 128. Italics added.

<sup>27</sup> For the reading of de Hooch, see, (Bernstein 2006), p. 20–45. Bernstein associates what he calls de Hooch’s “impossible hope for realism” with a “naïveté” that, as he says, he would “want for him.” (p. 37.) While it is important that what Bernstein specifically denies is that Cavell would be in a position to invoke ways in which “modernist works declare their material conditions of possibility,” and not the materiality of the medium *per se*, I hope it will shortly become clear from my arguments how the two are related and imply each other for Cavell. In my view the nature of the disagreement between Bernstein and Cavell, be it one sided, is fundamentally ideological, and rests on an aspect central to Cavell’s philosophy of the medium that is unacceptable for Bernstein’s approach to

Cavell to the idea that we cannot identify the physical basis of an art as its medium.

Such an argument must rely on close-reading Cavell's text in a mode that Cavell himself sometimes calls necessary "rigmarole." Consider Cavell's formulation in the passage cited, according to which "wood or stone would not be a medium of sculpture *in the absence of the art of sculpture*." What this phrase asserts is that "wood or stone" *is* in fact a medium of sculpture, full stop, depending of course on the existence of the art of sculpture. Second, the enumeration of the characteristic media of traditional visual art also asserts the same thing in calling these "media". The final sentence repeats this as a conditional. To say that "the idea of the medium is not simply that of a physical material" is precisely to say that it *is* – but it is also other things, which is what the final hyphenated phrase makes clear by stating that the medium is "material-in-certain-characteristic-applications." This is in complete harmony with another key Cavell paragraph, which sheds further light on the question (returning now to *The World Viewed*):

But what is the medium of painting or poetry or music as such? One of two responses seem forced upon us, and neither is an answer to the question. A first response will be: The medium of music as such is sound as such; the medium of painting is paint as such, etc. Such responses seem to mean that all sound is music, all areas of color are paintings. But this says nothing about the nature of music or painting; it is a claim about someone's – or humankind's – experience of the world, e.g., that nature, or the passage of time or space, is for certain creatures a medium of expression. [...] A second response will be: Nothing is *the* medium of, say, painting as such. A medium of painting is whatever way or ways paint is managed so as to create objects we accept as paintings. Only an art can define its media.<sup>28</sup>

While the same kind of points about an implicit affirmation of materiality hold for this passage as much the Cavell passage cited above (*viz.*, that

art. What this disagreement consists in is not easy to establish as it has to do with an aspect of Cavell's philosophy of art, which is itself difficult to articulate explicitly, namely the concept of naïveté itself, and its legitimacy for philosophy. The articulation of this difficulty is central to my present effort.

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certain *material* media are for human beings media of expression), the relationship between the two “responses” is articulated by Cavell a few pages earlier in terms of a potential problem with his use of the term “automatism”. Cavell introduces the term to name and describe (and further elaborate) the “second response” in the paragraph cited above. An “automatism” writes Cavell, is “[...] what gives significance to features of [the] physical basis”, namely “the artistic discoveries of form and genre and type and technique.” Cavell comments:

It may seem perverse of me, since [...] I am trying to free the idea of a medium from its confinement in referring to the physical bases of various arts, [that] I go on using the same word to name those bases as well as to characterize modes of achievement within the arts. I do not take the perverseness here to be of my own making. Why not just stick to terms like ‘form,’ or, as Northrop Frye uses it, ‘genre’? But *confusion here is caused by precisely the fact that this concept is justified in both places*. And it will not be dispelled by redefining or substituting some labels.<sup>29</sup>

As far as Cavell’s affirmation of the identity thesis goes, this is as explicit as it gets, and I think we may consider the point settled. At the same time, those familiar with Cavell’s writings will have noticed that my quotations purposefully edit a significant context for Cavell’s claims within which all of these points about the medium are introduced, namely modernist art and film, and the relationship of both of these to each other, to philosophy, and to what Cavell in *The World Viewed* calls “traditional art,” whose central instance in that book is painting (while in *Must We Mean What We Say* it is music and drama). The editing is not merely rhetorical. I purposefully avoided evoking these complexities in order to make the point, which I think is true, and which the paragraph last cited makes explicitly, that Cavell is committed to a philosophical position affirming the materiality of the medium of art in general, implying that it is justified to identify the medium of art with its physical basis.

In due course it will be necessary to re-situate Cavell’s claim about the materiality of the medium in its native context, namely Cavell’s concept

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<sup>29</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 105. Italics added.



of modernism, as this assumption will be found to be essential to the final step of the argument of this paper in Part 3. However, we must first turn to Cavell's conception of philosophy as exemplified by film.

### 3. Film as Philosophy

#### 3.1. Introduction

This section will construct the first part of a two-step argument. My main concern will be to establish evidence for the idea that *The World Viewed* (together with *Pursuits of Happiness*) represent a Copernican turn in Cavell's conception of philosophy in identifying film's ontologically based "naïve realism" as a mode of philosophizing that Cavell's early writings articulated as the goal of modernist philosophy, a condition to which philosophy aspires to in its post-Wittgensteinian condition within Cavell's own writings.

In Section 4 of this paper I will then use this identification to argue for the surprising conclusion that film's becoming the "last traditional art" for Cavell should be understood as implicitly identifying the rise of the use of perspective in the Italian Quattrocento as a moment when painting becomes art by making one of the most fundamental aspects of its medium, namely the materiality of the work, significant in and by the construction of pictorial space on the basis of Albertian one point perspective.<sup>30</sup>

As I mentioned, my support for this ambitious goal will resemble something like an existential mathematical proof: all that I will show is that in one instance of a filmic treatment of a Quattrocento work by a representative early practitioner of perspective (Piero della Francesca) such an identification may be legitimately established by a procedure I would like to think of as an instance of what Cavell calls "philosophical criticism" of a filmic reading of the same work by Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*.

For the purposes of this section I will employ the shorthand 'Cavell's thesis' to designate the idea that film is philosophy, and I will argue that

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Cavell: "If film is seriously to be thought of as an art at all [Cavell gives reasons for his doubt elsewhere], then it needs to be explained how it can have avoided the fate of modernism, which in practice means how it can have maintained its continuities of audiences and genres, how it can have been taken seriously without having assumed the burden of seriousness. For the blatant fact about film is that, if it is art, it is the one live traditional art, the one that can take its tradition for granted." (Cavell 1979b), pp. 14-15.

this identification of film and philosophy is both *sui generis* for Cavell (employing a term used by Joseph Margolis to characterize “the human”), and that it is, indeed, ontological.

### **3.2. The Ontological Thesis**

Describing Cavell's thesis about the identity of film and philosophy as ‘ontological’ is first of all meant to emphasize that it is more than a helpful metaphor. To repeat, it expresses the claim that film *is* in some sense identical with philosophy: that film *is* philosophy. It is this ontological identity that I am interested in making sense of, first, by clarifying what it could possibly mean, second, by identifying at least one sense in which it could be true, and, third, by saying something about how it could be important and/or helpful (as it will become apparent, I think that the separation of these tasks is only possible to a limited extent). This is a tall order, and it may be useful first to see whether it could be reasonably claimed that Cavell ever said or implied something like this “thesis”.<sup>31</sup>

In this connection it may be helpful to note that the conception of a strict ontological identity is often not directly attributed to Cavell, but to one of the foremost experts on his philosophical work, Stephen Mulhall, who has applied it to yield philosophical analyses of films important on their own account in his book *On Film*.<sup>32</sup> In this book we get a version of Cavell's thesis that is almost as strong as the ontological identity I am interested in, but not quite.

Mulhall introduces his version of “Cavell's thesis” in two parts. He begins with the idea that films (the *Alien* series in particular) “philosophize”:

I do not look at these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers; I see them rather

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<sup>31</sup> I take it that this discussion is not closed, and in fact I know of no really satisfactory clarification of the ontological claim despite the wonderful, and by now voluminous literature on how film is philosophical both in the theoretical and the critical mode. My claim that no existing account is satisfactory (at least in conveying Cavell's precise sense) is both negative and empirical, so it admits of no conclusive proof in principle aside from a complete listing and analysis of all the ways in which this thesis has been understood. For an excellent survey of analytical construals of the identity (which omits the sense I seek to establish here) see (Wartenberg, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> (Mulhall 2001)

*as themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments*, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy's raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophizing.<sup>33</sup>

This way of putting things proved fairly controversial (beyond what many perceived to be the sheer provocation of making the *Alien* series a target of philosophical analysis – and other sci-fi, such as *Terminator II*), for the sense in which films can be said to “reflect on and evaluate arguments” is not immediately obvious, especially given the *caveat* Mulhall follows up with to the effect that these arguments are not given as material in the film that the philosopher subsequently reflects on, but, rather, that film itself does this reflecting in some manner, just in virtue of its being *film*.<sup>34</sup> Subsequently, Mulhall sharpens the claim and introduces a crucial explicatory clarification regarding the form of “reflection” that seems to be at issue, namely that films philosophize in virtue of “reflecting on the conditions of their own possibility”:

[...] we could say that the [*Alien*] series as a whole makes progress by reflecting upon the conditions of its own possibility. But to make progress by reflecting upon the conditions of its own possibility is also as good a characterization as could be desired of the way in which any truly rigorous philosophy must proceed; for any philosophy that failed to engage in such reflection would fail to demand of itself what it makes its business to demand of any and every other discipline with which it presumes to engage. Hence thinking of the *Alien* series as an exemplary instance of cinematic modernism, we might also consider it as exemplary of cinema that finds itself in the condition of philosophy – of film as philosophy.<sup>35</sup>

Now, it is crucial to point out that this is indeed stronger than anything Cavell ever said explicitly, for Cavell's writings are mostly highly circum-

<sup>33</sup> Op.cit., p 12. Italics added.

<sup>34</sup> The somewhat disheartening controversy prompted Mulhall to offer further defense of his claim in (Mulhall 2007). From the perspective of my current take, this latter essay offers nothing new. Needless to say, in my view, Mulhall got it essentially right the first time.

<sup>35</sup> *emph*Op. cit., p.12. Italics added.

spect in talking about the relationship of philosophy and film. Even though Mulhall's version just about falls short of enunciating the strict ontological identity that is the target of my inquiry, Cavell himself has never to my knowledge committed to print such an explicitly concise version of his thesis as the one used by Mulhall. What I intend to argue now is that we can nonetheless identify the stronger, indeed, the strongest version in Cavell, and that in fact there is a certain softening of the original version in Mulhall. How so?

### **3.3. Naïveté and Self-reflexivity**

It will be helpful, if I make clear the main lines of the argument of this section of my paper at the outset. I think of Cavell's thesis, Cavell's original version of Mulhall's characterization of film, as both paradoxical and of such nature that it can only be conveyed indirectly. The latter is the reason why it is never explicitly stated by Cavell, whereas it is the paradoxical aspect that makes it elusive. In brief, I find myself largely in agreement with William Rothman, who in an excellent summary of Cavell's ideas about film formulates the connection (or identity, as I would have it) between film and philosophy within *The World Viewed* as follows:

In *The World Viewed* [...] film *is* the subject, *the* subject of the book [and] philosophy *is* the subject, *the* subject of the book [...] What makes this possible is the fact that in *The World Viewed*, as in the movies that motivate its writing, philosophy and film are not separate subjects; they are joined in a conversation so intimate as to constitute a kind of marriage of equals envisioned by the Hollywood "remarriage comedies" that *Pursuits of Happiness* goes on to study.<sup>36</sup>

This is almost Cavell's thesis in the form I am after, except for this troublesome mediating term: subject. How do we get from here to my desired copula? Building further on Rothmann's observation, my suggestion is that we may find a characterization of both film and philosophy in Cavell which are ultimately identical, although procedurally, rather than explicitly enunciated, being then enacted or performed by the kind of conversational

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<sup>36</sup> (Rothmann 1998), p. 354.

prose that constitutes the practice of philosophy in the pages of *The Pursuits of Happiness*. This will also help in identifying the sense in which it is important in just this respect that Cavell talks about *re*-marriage, and not just marriage (a point oddly omitted by Rothmann in the preceding passage). Just as the state of marriage ontologically transcends intimacy (which is why the essence of marriage can become a philosophical question), philosophy, rather than merely engaging film in intimate conversation, actually recognizes – call it acknowledgement – in film its visceral *other*, and as thus makes it speak with its own voice, lending it its own body, so to speak, namely language. As Cavell writes:

...if philosophy can be thought of as the world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself, then one mode of philosophical criticism (call it philosophical criticism) can be thought of as the world of a particular work brought to consciousness of itself.<sup>37</sup>

While this passage is about art in general, my claim is that in the case of film the “world of the work” may be described as precisely the philosophy that “brings that world to consciousness,” itself being “brought to consciousness” by philosophical criticism, that is philosophy brought back to its native medium: ordinary language. Moreover, I should like to claim that philosophy for Cavell recognizes in film not merely its other, so to speak, but its perfected self, its best realization. Philosophy approaches film, (or rather those of us who philosophize in sympathy with Cavell’s idea of it do) with a sense of awe and humility because it perceives therein the effortless and self-legitimizing realization of its own highest aspirations. The best articulation of this idea that I know of is due to Robert Pippin, who relegates the relevant remark to a footnote, perhaps in recognition of its “courting of outrageousness”:

There is something of philosophical importance at stake in pictorial achievements even if they are not – just because they are not – philosophy themselves. That is to say, the claim is not that such artworks are works of philosophy, or philosophy *manqué*, but that they embody a distinct form of aesthetic intelligibility, or an aesthetic way

<sup>37</sup> (Cavell 2002), p. 313. (The passage is from: *The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear*)

of rendering intelligible and compelling a variety of issues of the deepest importance to philosophy. [fn: The stronger claim would be that whatever makes art intelligible is something that is essential to philosophy but that philosophy itself cannot supply; the *even* stronger claim would be that art renders intelligible what philosophy tries to reveal but does so better.] (That is, they do if these works succeed, a condition that itself raises a number of problems.)<sup>38</sup>

Now, given that the identity in question cannot be a literal one (film *is*, after all, different from philosophy as Pippin says, rightly), its possibility must depend on some shared conceptual characterization. The two terms I would like to propose for this shared characterization are the ones I proposed before as central to naïve realism as an aesthetic attitude, namely naïveté and self-reflexivity.

I mentioned that Cavell's view will turn out to be paradoxical, and it is easy to see how the conjoined realization of these two properties is paradoxical by simply invoking a few naïve intuitions about naïveté that intend nothing more than to explore the word's dictionary definition. Insofar as "un-reflexive" (as well as "innocent") are cognate terms with naïve, in talking about naïve self-reflexivity we seem straightforwardly to be courting paradox by invoking a kind unreflexivity as a property of reflexivity, so to speak. However, it may be helpful to point out the obvious, namely that these are precisely co-realizable properties of everyday human consciousness, or subjectivity, and their conjoining is therefore what lends the phrase "naïveté" its meaning already in Schiller<sup>39</sup> to whom the idea of applying the concept philosophically to art is due: given that naïveté is a concept that captures a human attitude and as such is dependent on consciousness (which, morally speaking, is the most serious problem with in some cases) there is no particular problem in thinking of naïveté and self-reflexivity as co-realized. Naïveté does not exclude self-consciousness, which is what makes it into a philosophical problem. On the contrary, the

<sup>38</sup> (Pippin 2014), p. 3. Pippin's book is thoroughly inspired by Cavell's philosophy of art in a number of ways both explicitly and implicitly, but the connecting of this passage to the theme at hand is my own doing.

<sup>39</sup> For Schiller we find the naïve in nature when we perceive its unaffectedness, but this depends on a mental operation wherewith we find that "nature stand(s) in contrast to art and shame(s) her". The other "naïve" is a quality of mind. Ibid. p. 2.

latter provides the “context” so to speak that makes it possible, and it is presumably something like the revolutionary characterization of human subjectivity in Kant and Fichte that led Schiller himself to the discovery of the term for aesthetics. However, naïveté by definition is also importantly an attitude that cannot really know itself, or acknowledge itself (Schlegel’s point), which is why I warned that Cavell’s conception of philosophy can only be demonstrated indirectly, much like the way an articulation of Schlegel’s conception of irony can only be based on aphorisms.<sup>40</sup> Let me add, that the naïveté I am after cannot quite be like that of the child’s naïveté, but somehow or other must be a more sophisticated version as practiced by “grown ups”. So the challenge is now to produce a persuasive account from Cavell’s magic hat, perhaps as a corrective to Schiller’s account, as to what a philosophical naïveté could be like.<sup>41</sup>

Of the two concepts, i.e., naïveté and self-reflexivity, naïveté is in some sense the more important one, but because there is this paradoxical twist to it, I will begin with self-reflexivity. It will lead us straight into the topic of naïveté.

My impression is that Mulhall’s joint characterization of film and philosophy, as both reflecting on the conditions of their possibilities, comes off as sitting a little bit uneasily, as if somehow tentatively made. Also, Cavell is not cited as a source. The reason may be, I suspect, that *nowhere* in the pages of *The World Viewed* does Cavell characterize philosophy itself as self-reflexive, and in *The Pursuits of Happiness* this is confined to a single side-remark. This is worth quoting:

[...] I have indicated in previous writings ways in which, as I might put it, film exists in a state of philosophy: it is inherently self-reflexive, takes itself as an inevitable part of its craving for speculation. [...] It may be felt that these properties apply, more or less, to all the ma-

<sup>40</sup> Perhaps this is the reason why Bernstein seems only to concede the legitimate practice of Cavell’s mode of philosophizing in relation to his use of the ‘fragment.’ See *op. cit.* pp. 137-138.

<sup>41</sup> That the idea of naïveté regained is central to Cavell’s philosophical endeavor as an “education for grown-ups” is most often acknowledged by commentators in focusing on Cavell’s claiming for philosophy the effort to re-find the “child’s voice.” For a very interesting account of this, see Vincent Colapetrio: *Voice and the Interrogation of Philosophy: Inheritance, Abandonment, and Jazz*. In: (Saito and Standish 2012).

jor arts. In that case what I am showing is that philosophy is to be understood, however else, aesthetically.<sup>42</sup>

The remark is important because, as we will see in a moment, it applies to film in general, and to the Hollywood films in particular which are the subject of *Pursuits of Happiness*. True, even here Cavell is not offering a characterization of philosophy *per se*, but film. It follows nevertheless that to 'exist in a state of philosophy' means to be 'inherently self-reflexive', and one assumes that this would apply to philosophy itself, insofar as philosophy must exist in a state of philosophy, so to speak.<sup>43</sup> What is surprising is that there is a strong and explicit sense in which, in all of *The World Viewed*, a form of art becoming self-reflexive, i.e., philosophical, is, to all ends and purposes, a mark of *decadence* (which by no means excludes artistic excellence for Cavell) of that particular art form, a state characterized as one of "modernism" wherein – to quote Cavell – its "traditions are no longer *natural* to it". Here is a very important place from *The World Viewed* where Cavell repeats this well-worn point from his earlier writings:

What needs accounting for is simultaneously that the tradition is still available to current successful films, and also that serious works are in the process of questioning their relation to the tradition, that they are moving into the modernist predicament in which an art has lost its natural relation to its history [...] When in such a state an art explores its medium, it is exploring the conditions of its existence; it is asking exactly whether, and under what conditions, it can survive.<sup>44</sup>

And he adds elsewhere:

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<sup>42</sup> (Cavell 1981), p.14.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Cavell: "If I deny a distinction, it is the still fashionable distinction between philosophy and meta-philosophy, the philosophy of philosophy. [...] I would regard this fact – that philosophy is one of its own normal topics – as in turn defining for the subject, for what I wish philosophy to do." (Cavell 2002), p. xxxii.

<sup>44</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 72. The most thorough explorations of this idea, preparing its appearance in *The World Viewed*, can be found in *Music Discomposed* and *A Matter of Meaning It* in (Cavell 2002). These explorations are among those of Cavell's early writings that, as he says, he "still uses."



[...] I have sometimes said that art now exists in the condition of philosophy, since it has always been the condition of philosophy to attempt to escape itself...<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, *The World Viewed* states this idea even more squarely:

“Art now exists in the condition of philosophy.”<sup>46</sup>

Given that the earlier remark specifically referred to Hollywood film, characterized precisely for its “naïveté” (Cavell’s own phrase), meaning that these films were made in a period when film managed to be a “live traditional art”, an art that successfully “escapes the modernist predicament,” we seem to be forced to conclude that Cavell’s film-books argue for *two different attributions of self-reflexivity* to film: one general, and one specific to film in entering into its state of modernism. What to make of this seeming contradiction?

There are subtle differences in these different characterizations of film (or art in general) and philosophy as self-reflexive, and I cannot now go into this matter in all its depth.<sup>47</sup> Instead, I offer the conclusion that they open the possibility for identifying *two different kinds of self-reflexivity* as the mark of the philosophical in art, and more specifically the philosophical condition of film. One kind characterizes art-forms moving into their respective states of modernism and self-examination. The other kind, however, marks off the art-form in question as still being in its classical or “naïve” phase and is actually a condition exhibited by what Cavell calls “canonical” works of art that establish the art-form itself (its medium) by making aspects of their “physical basis” significant.<sup>48</sup> There is a very important passage in Cavell’s own gloss on *The World Viewed*, the essay titled *More on the World Viewed* written in response to critics and subsequently published

<sup>45</sup> (Cavell 1988), p.20(From: *The Thought of movies*)

<sup>46</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> One has to do with film “taking itself as an inevitable part of its craving for speculation”. The other with “exploring its medium”, the third with “escaping itself”.

<sup>48</sup> That the idea of canonicity is central to aesthetics, and both canonical works and canonical critics are what provide the “data” for philosophical criticism is stated both in *Must We Mean What We Say*, (Cavell 2002), p. 182., and in *The World Viewed*, (Cavell 1979b), p. 9. Cavell mentions that one of the problems in working on the aesthetics of film is precisely such a lack of an agreed canon both as to films and as to criticism.

together with the first work as a single volume, which contains perhaps the most salient passage bringing out this very point about classical films:

One of the burdens of my book is that a film of such depth [such as Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*] must be giving deep significance to conditions of the medium of film itself. (This is, or ought to be, the meaning of "cinematic".)<sup>49</sup>

My understanding of the fact that Cavell calls this principle one of the "burdens" of his original book, as opposed to an articulate thesis, is precisely that it has to do with the naïve phase of an art-form which in a manner eschews articulation apart from the discovery of such naïve reflexivity by philosophical criticism. In this phase the particular art-form has not begun questioning itself in the sense of what it is that will enable it to survive its traditions (and automatisms) becoming problematic to it; it is not trying to "escape itself" but is "still" exploring its medium in a "naïve" fashion, endowing it as much with a certain innocent glow as with an exuberant energy that informs the pleasure it provides. We find much support for this idea in Cavell, and it is explicitly connected to his appreciation of the talkies:

The movie's ease within its assumptions and achievements – its conventions remaining convenient for so much of its life, remaining convincing and fertile without self-questioning – is central to its pleasure for us. We shall sometimes think of this as film's naïveté [...]. How has film been able to provide this pleasure? How is one to explain the effect of those ordinary instances, which just seem to have been made for the industry to make? What is the power of film that it could survive (even profit artistically from) so much neglect and ignorant contempt from those in power over it? What is film?<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 181. (The passage is from: *More of the World Viewed*). For the explicit linking of this idea to what I earlier called the 'physical identity thesis,' cf., also: "I hold on to the critical hypothesis which runs through my book as well as through this continuation of it, that pride of place within the canon of serious films will be found occupied by those films that most clearly and most deeply discover the powers of the medium itself, those that give fullest significance to the possibilities and necessities of its physical basis." Ibid, p. 219.

<sup>50</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 15. Cf. also Cavell's further remarks on the "pleasure art provides" (Cavell 1979b), p. 98.

Thus, the central aesthetic question of *The World Viewed* is posed in this passage precisely in term of a need for investigating the concept of naïveté. This passage, with its almost theological inflection, implicitly contains the answer to the question it raises: it is innocence that protects one from evil, so to speak. But anyone familiar with Cavell's analyses in *The World Viewed*, and *Pursuits of Happiness* will recall how the thrust of his argument there concerns the ways in which precisely these allegedly naïve films acknowledge (i.e. reflect on) their medium as part of their meaning. One need only to recall Cavell's discussion of the manner in which movie-stardom is a specific possibility of the filmic medium, which is over and over acknowledged and thematized by the analysis of "the modest collection of talkies at [his] disposal," i.e., the films analyzed in *The Pursuits of Happiness* (as well as the hundreds of other films Cavell seems to be capable of recalling in detail). But does it also imply that these films are somehow more truly "philosophical" than some more "modernist" cinema? Wouldn't this be somehow already equivalent to arriving at the conclusion suggested in the following section of my paper that, say, Quattrocento painting is more "philosophical," or philosophical in a truer and more originary sense for Cavell than, say, abstract expressionism, Warhol's ready-mades, or conceptual art, etc.? I hope it is indeed difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is precisely what Cavell seems to be implying by his analyses, (while perhaps seeming to contradict himself by his more explicit statements about art being merely *now* in the condition of philosophy I quoted above). Difficult, that is, unless we are also prepared to identify a conception of philosophy in Cavell which makes it naïve precisely in the way these films are naïve, or at least identifying them as aspiring to this kind of naïveté, or perhaps even just constituting the condition of such constitutional eternal longing for the kind of naïveté embodied in these films. As I said, by the very definition of the "naïve" such an attitude would be incapable of giving an explicit account of itself (or reluctant to do so) – it could only manifest itself as a kind of practice – the way the practice of viewing films together may lead to conversation itself deserving the name of philosophy.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Cavell's remarks on "companionship" having been essential to his own experience of film in a historical period that he regards as sadly over in the introduction to *The World Viewed*.

### 3.4. *Close-reading Cavell*

While Cavell articulates in many different forms and on several different occasions this idea, I hope to show how it emerges also by subjecting the following remarkable passage to an exercise in close-reading in the Cavellian spirit.<sup>52</sup> It will show that this is exactly Cavell's idea of doing philosophy in the "naïve" mode (the explicit qualification being ultimately unnecessary), whose adoption in the film-books I described (perhaps a bit too grandly in the light of its associations), as representing a Copernican turn in Cavell's thinking:

I understand [that which makes philosophy - philosophy] as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape; such things, for example, as whether we can know the world as it is in itself, or whether others really know the nature of one's own experiences, or whether good and bad are relative, or whether we might not now be dreaming that we are awake, or whether modern tyrannies and weapons and spaces and speeds and art are continuous with the past of the human race or discontinuous, and hence whether the learning of the human race is not irrelevant to the problems it has brought before itself. Such thoughts are instances of the characteristic human willingness to allow questions for itself which it cannot answer with satisfaction. Cynics about philosophy, and perhaps about humanity, will find that questions without answers are empty; dogmatists will claim to have arrived at answers; philosophers after my heart will rather wish to convey the thought that while there may be no satisfying answers to such questions *in certain forms*, there are, so to speak, directions to answers, ways to think, that are worth the time of your life to discover.

<sup>52</sup> The persuasiveness of my exercise depends in part on Cavell's insistence on the very first page of *The Claim of Reason* (no accident), that a philosopher's primary task is to produce texts ((Cavell 1979a), p. 1.), by which I take Cavell to mean texts that may precisely bear close-reading of the sort that most of his own philosophical writing depends on, i.e., texts that aspire to be like "great" texts at least in the sense that the philosopher, like the artist, can be taken to be "responsible for everything that happens in his work" (Cavell 2002), p. 236.

(It is a further question for me whether directions of this kind are teachable, in ways suited to what we think of as schools).<sup>53</sup>

That this remarkable little text is self-reflexive goes without saying. It is a philosophical text that reflects on its own nature: it is philosophy trying to define philosophy. At the same time it is also clearly intentionally naïve in many ways as a piece of philosophy: it does not use technical language to say what it says – it aspires, or pretends to be, straightforward, and to mean just what it says.<sup>54</sup> Also, what it suggests explicitly is also a definition of philosophy as a form of naïveté: it says that in some sense philosophy is no different from the thinking that ordinary human beings do about ordinary matters, except that it does so “undistractedly”, which seems to be the key phrase in this passage. However, the passage also seems to begin undermining its own pretended naïveté right from the beginning. What, for instance does Cavell mean by “ordinary human beings”? He cannot just straightforwardly mean *all* human beings. Some of them, certainly those for whom “philosophy is esoteric” because “they guard themselves against its knowledge,” i.e., “most men”<sup>55</sup> never have it occur to them – even as a flash across a landscape – “whether we can know the world as it is in itself”. And many of these people must be normally intelligent people by any account. So how is the word “ordinary” helpful exactly, if at all? What work is it doing?

“Undistracted” is a somewhat ambiguous word. It can mean sustained concentration, but it can also mean a kind of engrossment and self-forgetting that is characteristic of, among other things, movie going. Perhaps it is not going too far to suggest that cinema is implicitly figuring as philosophy in this little text (indeed, as I would argue, as the only means for Cavell whereby we can really learn to do philosophy “out of school”, which may in fact be the only way).<sup>56</sup> If you assemble the pieces provided by Cav-

<sup>53</sup> (Cavell 1988), p.9.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Cavell: “[The philosopher’s] examples and interpretations have, and are meant to have, the weight an ordinary man will give them; and he is himself speaking as an ordinary man, so that if he is wrong in his claims he must allow himself to be convinced in the ways any man thinking will be, or will not be.” (Cavell 2002), p. xl.

<sup>55</sup> (Cavell 2002), p. xl.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Cavell: “Now, what is academic philosophy? It seems significant that this question has no obvious answer. In the way it is significant that the questions, >>What is the

ell, “undistracted engrossment in the ordinary as a form of fantasy” would be as a good candidate of philosophy emerging out of this passage as any other. However, it is just as good a definition of cinema as any other. But can this be right? Isn't the text then denying its own naïveté by asserting this kind of second meaning, and denying the first? I suggest that the key to Cavell's use of the “metaphor” of the ordinary – call it that for a second in its present appearance – lies in the elaborately long sentence and its structure that constitutes the entire first half of this passage. Notice, first, that the kind of things that occur according to Cavell to ordinary human beings as a flashes across the landscape, are not at all the kinds of things that occur to just anyone: they are relatively abstruse philosophical problems. The long sentence performs this interestingly, because it moves indeed from the “ordinary” into the abstruse, and then emerges again into something we might be willing to describe as “ordinary”, for who has indeed not wondered where technology is really leading us? In other words, there is an implicit acknowledgement in this sentence that philosophical problems far from being ordinary, are in fact extra-ordinary – they may arise from ordinary reality, but they leave it behind. At the same time their purpose is to finally return there, as if from a dream, increasing our capacity for making sense of it. But is it then finally possible that this text – although suggesting that philosophy is a kind of concentrated naïveté – is not itself naïve, but God forbid, even manipulative? I think this is the point that needs to be denied, and its denial is in complete harmony with everything Cavell has written, with a particularly salient passage being his invocation of the figure of Socrates at the beginning of his own first book length public appearance as a philosopher in the foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, not as a representant of irony, but of purity:

The figure of Socrates now haunts contemporary philosophical practice and conscience more poignantly than ever – the pure figure motivated to philosophy only by the assertions of others, himself making none; the philosopher who did not need to write.<sup>57</sup>

Here is where it becomes important to remind ourselves that in *Pursuits*

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audience of philosophy? Must it have one? If so, what is it to gain from it? <<, have no obvious answers.” Ibid., p. xli.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. xxxv.

of *Happiness*, perhaps his most Socratic work, Cavell is talking not about marriage, but re-marriage. These films exemplify in their very themes the kind of roundabout returning to itself that philosophy posits as its ideal of a “heightened” discourse, to quote another metaphor Cavell employs for such a practice.<sup>58</sup> The concept that I find helpful here is one used by Agnes Heller in a different context.<sup>59</sup> She argues that there is a certain philosophical attitude or maturity, associated with a kind of teaching and thinking style, that can only be described as a wager on the possibility that naïveté once lost can also be regained. That even though the capacity for naïveté (which one can also associate with wonderment) is lost

<sup>58</sup> Opening yet another rich field of associations for understanding Cavell’s concept of modernism as both cognate with Thomas Mann’s conception art as “intensified life,” as well as Bernard Berenson’s concept of the tactile, which also depends on precisely such a conception of modernism inspired by Adolph Hildebrand’s conception of sculpture (an example of how modernism can change the “look” of traditional art, as Cavell says, or “even change what the past *is*” (Cavell 2002), p. 184.) Both Mann and Berenson work out an anti-Cartesian conception of the human that I take to be related to Cavell’s concept of the “humane.” In fact, further work in applying Cavell’s concept of the medium to old Masters must inevitably proceed by a reevaluation Berenson’s thoroughly misunderstood and underappreciated conception of the “tactile.”

<sup>59</sup> (Heller 1983): *‘Lukacs’ Later Philosophy*. The relationship of Lukács’ later aesthetics, in its effort at establishing the “medium” of art in a sense that is cognate with Cavell’s work, and also in terms of its pursuit of a philosophical articulation of the “everyday” and a return to the “everyday” as a goal for both philosophy and art in *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, deserve further study. It might also shed some light on Cavell’s sometimes puzzling relationship to the concept of “dialectic,” and to Marxism (which goes deeper in my view than the inspiration of his early work by the student movements of the sixties). The decisive difference which almost goes without saying, lies in the fact that Lukács’ concern in his later work is a Schillerian attempt to establish existing socialism as a realm of second naïveté, wherein “culture” is possible once more, but its unwilling subjects must somehow be educated to cognize this. Cavell’s pursuit of a philosophy of the future denies any such reality for an existing new culture, aside from his Marxian inflected reference to how a University community is in principal committed to creating a utopia which “[...] enables us now to teach one thing today and learn another tomorrow, to hunt for time to write in the morning, fish for a free projector in the afternoon, try to raise money for projects in the evening, and after a seminar read criticism? To some this will not seem a Utopian set of activities, but in the meantime, and for those with taste for this particular disunity, why not have it?” (Cavell 1981), p. 265. And modernist art for Lukács ceases to have any value with Cézanne and Van Gogh, although his own studies of cinema provide further food for thought as to the affinities between his thought and Cavell’s.

through experience, what is characteristic of the philosophical attitude is the hope that one can find one's way back to this original wonderment through learning, and eventually transmitting this learning in and by conversation. Heller calls this ideal "second naïveté". One might even call it, in the American mode, a kind of self-imposed "fake it till you make it" attitude to philosophy, with the one decisive difference that it is perfectly in earnest, perfectly genuine. The intent is not irony, but the hope for a Socratic philosophical practice

It is my conviction that the only way to read Cavell's text – and indeed all of his writings on film – is just as such "wagers" on naïveté as a philosophical strategy, with full awareness that only those will really be able to follow "the philosopher as guide" who are able – by engaging the subtleties of his/her text, or the subtleties of the cinematic miracles of the talkies that engage philosophers and pupils in conversation – to rise to the appreciation and verbal reproduction of this re-doubling of ordinary experience upon itself.<sup>60</sup> This is not at all an unusual attitude to philosophy when one reflects on it. Cavell's philosophical heroes: Socrates, Descartes, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and the American Transcendentalists come to mind, but Kierkegaard might be the best example.

### **3.5. Normativity**

There is one catch in all of this, namely that even if all of this sounds persuasive in arguing for a sense in which Cavell's thesis might be both intelligible and true, it may disappoint, and many have found it disappointing, for the simple reason that it is a normative thesis about film. As I understand those and only those films can be said to philosophize in this classical sense which are *great*, or canonical, precisely in virtue of representing this classical stage. To see this, it is enough to return to the way in which the term "ordinary" functions in Cavell's cinematic definition of philosophy. Given what I hoped to have established above, i.e., that Cavell cannot mean everyone by "ordinary human beings", I think the only

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. xx. For the manner in which this involves rising to the paradoxical attitude of second naïveté, as I here call it, in terms of having, in order to "educate your experience" to learn to trust your experience, but that "the education cannot be achieved ahead of the trusting," in Cavell's formulation of the paradox involved, see, (Cavell 1981), p.12.



real way to make sense of what the passage says is to realize that it is actually the willingness to philosophize (in the way Cavell understands it), that defines what human beings are *per se*, or at least those who are not cynical about their humanity, and not the other way around. In other words the notion of the ordinary in Cavell is already a normative ideal. It is a value term. This may not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with Cavell's sources, namely Thoreau, Emerson and Heidegger, among others. It is also implicit in the central piece in Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*, which is an essay on the *Philadelphia story*, and Cavell's slightly stumbling, as if embarrassed, Deweyite concern there with "natural aristocracy", the idea that the talkie's search for this American ideal in reflecting on the condition of stardom by reference to the characters played by Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn, but also, and centrally, in terms of the way these films establish their canonical status as works of art in their search for the "new human" in terms of a search for "new woman."<sup>61</sup>

The search for how Cavell's thesis may be seen as *sui generis* inevitably leads to the conclusion that we can only look at it this way if we are also prepared to recognize it as a normative claim about the "classical" phase of cinema (and as to some degree helping to define – for those of us who have a taste for such things – the classical phase of cinema, cinematic greatness). This is in my opinion the deeper reason why Mulhall is a bit evasive about attributing his own position to Cavell. He loves the films he is talking about, and even though he mentions in passing that these are works of "cinematic modernism" – evoking thereby Cavell's second, decadent sense of self-reflexivity without properly deploying it in all its consequences, he is loath to own up to the inherent normativity of Cavell's conception, because it would involve disparaging the very same movies whose brilliance his mode of analysis really helps to establish.

Some may share this disappointment.<sup>62</sup> However, I would like to sug-

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<sup>61</sup> (Cavell 1981), p. 16.

<sup>62</sup> For good reasons. I think it is far too radical to imply – as Cavell seems to – that only cynics would think that "questions without answers are empty". One is certainly reluctant to share the idea that the only serious form of humanity is one, which makes the self-susceptible to philosophical wonderment, even were that capacity for that "wonderment" somehow enmeshed within our ordinary capacity to engage with reality. Part of the point of Cavell's mode of philosophizing in the form of "second naïveté" is precisely to suggest

gest at least one sense in which we shouldn't namely by recognizing in the pursuit of philosophical naiveté a pedagogical ideal, a profound way in which philosophy might be an "education for grown-ups". It provides us both a reason *for*, and a mode *of* engaging with these works that is not boringly pedantic, but in fact Socratic in the true sense. At the same time it is an ideal of preserving and transcending our ordinariness (an ideal for a truly democratic education) in dialogue with each other, and as hoping for a context of learning which is both a form of school, but at the same time somehow manages to rise beyond it.

In the final section of this paper, in returning to the thesis about materiality, I would also like to suggest that on the very terms of Cavell's philosophy, it is not merely film that opens up such possibilities for a Socratic education, but art itself in its original Western incarnation in Florentine Quattrocento painting, but also in understanding the achievements on Cavell's own terms of a filmmaker like Andrei Tarkovsky, who establishes his own genre of poetic cinema in a way that fits Cavell's ideas of canonicity hand-in-glove. These consequences, in turn raise a number of difficult questions for Cavell's philosophy which will not be addressed in this paper. One such conclusion, however, should be that Cavell's conception of normativity, the way in which the thought

[...] that works of art are valuable is analytically true of them; and that value is inescapable in human experience and conduct

is inherently more flexible in its consequences than some of Cavell's thoughts on film might lead us to expect.<sup>63</sup>

a way in which philosophy can help us escape the condition of thinking that "questions without answers are empty," and thereby become invested in philosophical reflection, which precisely offer a form of transcending a Schillerian humanistic ideal of aesthetic education without rejecting the idea of humanism altogether. I would like to think of this as a possibility for a different kind of liberal education coming alive in Cavell's work. Ways in which I would also like to think about it as anti-Cartesian are suggested in Section 4 of this paper. It is important to note that Cavell is aware of the issue, and specifically addresses it in a side remark in *The World Viewed*. Cf.: "It is no failure of a human being not to be a serious intellectual." (Cavell 1979b), p. 139.

<sup>63</sup> (Cavell 2002), p. 216. (The passage is from: *A Matter of Meaning It*)

## 4. Cavell and the Quattrocento: Reading Piero with Tarkovsky

### 4.1. Introduction

To return now to the question asked earlier about why reference to classical painting persists in being absent in Cavell's writings on film, we may begin by identifying a reason that would explain it well enough. Consider the following passage from Cavell's *The World Viewed*:

Perhaps what we must be faithful to is our knowledge that distance from *nature is no longer represented by perspective, which* [places us in relation to it, places nature before or away from us, and] *falsifies our knowledge that we are lost to nature, are absent from it, cannot face it.*<sup>64</sup>

Traditional painting is here implicitly identified by Cavell as “perspectival” painting, and further contrasted with film as the only art-form that can do justice to this existential condition with its inflection of “lostness” that is a pervasive theme in Cavell's writings, beginning with his identification of the need for philosophy to confront the “condition of modernism” from his early writings<sup>65</sup>, through the concern with perfectionism in his later work. However, in other passages Cavell seems at least a little bit more optimistic about the resources of “traditional art,” and its powers of *representation* one inevitably associates with perspectival painting:

Is the power of representation otherwise irretrievable? Is there no way to declare again the content of nature, not merely its conditions; to speak again from one's plight into the heart of a known community of which one is a known member, not merely speak of the terms on which any human existence is given? “Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven?” “Who knows what sort of life would result if we had attained to purity?”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 115. Italics added.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. (Cavell 2002), p. xxxiii., passim.

<sup>66</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 118.

I would like to read the poetical hopefulness of this passage, resonating as it does with Cavell's call for a "philosophy of the future," as acknowledging a possibility for how film might establish its identity, at least in some of its media, by reference to classical painting.<sup>67</sup> The conclusion of this essay lends some support to this thought by presenting one example for how Andrei Tarkovsky's filmic engagement of perspectival works from the Florentine Quattrocento establishes his own brand of poetic cinema as an (unrecognized) Cavellian genre. This genre declares itself as such in part by aspiring to "retrieving the power of representation" of classical art, evoking the very concepts of "body" and "purity" mentioned by Cavell in the passage quoted. Before moving on to this conclusion, however, it will be necessary to say a few words about the problem of the relationship film and classical painting in general, and Florentine painting in particular, as well the how perspective should be understood by Cavell to be playing an essential role in this relationship on the very terms of his own theory of the medium.

#### **4.2. Cavell's Critique of Panofsky**

My remarks will focus on Cavell's critique of Erwin Panofsky's conception of the filmic medium developed in Panofsky's classic *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*. This essay is one of Cavell's examples for a rare instance of "humane criticism" of film, and the source of a number of insights about "the role reality plays in this art,"<sup>68</sup> fundamental for his own ontology of movies. As I will show, Cavell is in principle committed to recognizing deep affinities between film and Quattrocento painting precisely for the reasons he criticizes Panofsky's *a prioristic* conception of the medium of film.

The main point I would like to make about Cavell's critique of Panof-

<sup>67</sup> In essence I am offering the way to begin thinking about Cavell's call for the "internal history of the relation of painting and photography generally," (Cavell 1979b), p. 237. fn. 37 that Cavell feels altogether lacking. In the same footnote he is generally dismissive of the use of painting in film as harboring aesthetically fruitful possibilities, but the only example he gives for the "direct inaccessibility of the powers of painting to the powers of movies" *ibid.*, is *An American in Paris*. My arguments in turn depend on the conviction others have found in the use of painting by film.

<sup>68</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 165.

sky is that by accepting Panofsky's monolithic conception of "traditional art," Cavell also implicitly accepts the assumption that perspective is the key to how Renaissance art establishes the concept of "traditional art" in the spirit of a humanistic materialism I characterized by citing Schiller earlier. This latter understanding of "traditional art" involves an interpretation of the way the Renaissance itself articulates the significance of the discovery of the "technology" of perspective.

As we are inevitably reminded again and again by the exponentially proliferating literature on perspective, the technique was probably invented in the early 1400's in the Republic of Florence, and "codified" shortly after its invention by a highly atypical thinker of the period, much like Cavell himself, namely Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting* (1452).<sup>69</sup> Alberti's treatise argues that due to the mathematical truth underlying perspective construction, painting has become a kind of philosophy, or knowledge in action: a mode of *sensual* knowledge: his own picturesque term for this is *la più grassa Minerva* – a fatter wisdom.<sup>70</sup> This is the term whose interpretation plays a key role in the humanistic theory of perspective, and the term that Cavell is in my view committed to interpreting in a manner that would allow thinking of Quattrocento painting as "invoking its

<sup>69</sup> The most beautiful and convincing portrait of Alberti as an atypical thinker hounded by what almost feel like modernist obsessions with self-legitimation is (Grafton 2000). Cavell's own engagement with the Renaissance is documented by his brilliant readings of Shakespeare. I cannot resist quoting what he there says about an aspect of experiencing Shakespearean drama. This remark can be read as if written in response to Quattrocento painting, and is a good indication of the way in which Alberti himself is a peculiar figure:

In King Lear we are differently implicated, placed into a world not obviously unlike ours [...] nor obviously like ours, [...] and somehow participating in the proceedings. [...] participating, as at a funeral, or marriage or inauguration, confirming something: it could not happen without us. It is not a dispute or a story, but history happening, and we are living through it; later we may discover what it means, when we discover what a life means. (Cavell 1969b), p.326.

The passage reads as an evocation of the manner in which a perspective painting determines our point of view and involves us in the event (think of Alberti's conception of *istoria*), while keeping the picture at a decorous distance from us.

<sup>70</sup> (Alberti 1966)

material conditions of possibility” in creating the concept of “traditional art.”

I will introduce some terminology by saying that Panofsky espouses what I would like to call the Cartesian view of perspective, whereas Cavell is implicitly committed to an anti-Cartesian view. The Cartesian conception of perspective interprets Alberti's conception of the “slice of the visual pyramid” or the “window,” as a kind of dematerialization of the work of art, insofar as it is a work of art (and it is that according to Panofsky just in virtue of the use of perspective). On the Cartesian conception, it is the construction of this window being based on mathematics, informed by a proto-scientific theory of vision that is primarily captured by Alberti's metaphor. Moreover, it is this implicit dematerialization of the painting that allows Panofsky to claim about painting in the Renaissance that it represents what he calls a “decompartmentalization of art and science” which makes this art Cartesian *avant la lettre*.<sup>71</sup> In short, Renaissance painting, for Panofsky, is a form of proto-science – which is how Panofsky understands Alberti's calling it a form of “sensate wisdom”.

It was also Erwin Panofsky, in his classic *Perspective as symbolic Form*, who first theorized the moment of invention of perspective as the moment when what Cavell calls “traditional art” comes into being.<sup>72</sup> Not surprisingly, it is this Cartesian conception of perspective that is at work in Panofsky's *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*, as a monolithic conception of “traditional art”, which is a thought poignantly expressed towards the conclusion of that essay:

The processes of all the earlier representational arts conform, in a higher or lesser degree, to an idealistic conception of the world. These arts operate from top to bottom, so to speak, and not from bottom to top; *they start with an idea to be projected into shapeless matter and not with the objects that constitute the physical world.* [...] It is the movies, and only the movies, that do justice to that materialistic

<sup>71</sup> See, (Panofsky 1953). This essay is perhaps Panofsky's most concise statement of his philosophy of the Renaissance as a historical period.

<sup>72</sup> (Panofsky 1997a). A great deal has been written on the way in which Panofsky's treatise is essentially Hegelian. I do think, however, that Cavell's specific critique (as implied by what follows) is original, and particularly interesting in the light of the profound affinities of his own aesthetics with a Hegelian view of art.

interpretation of the universe which, whether we like it or not, pervades contemporary civilization.<sup>73</sup>

My main claim about a “mistake” or “oversight” in Cavell’s critique of Panofsky is that by accepting and adopting Panofsky’s monolithic conception of “traditional art” Cavell also implicitly accepts the assumption that perspective is the key to this transformation in the spirit of a humanistic materialism I characterized by citing Schiller earlier.<sup>74</sup> However the entire thrust of Cavell’s theory of the medium should suggest that the artistic use and meaning of perspective, in a period such as the Quattrocento, cannot be determined *a priori*. This is precisely the gist of Cavell’s critique of Panofsky’s principal theses that the origins of film have to do with the exploitation of “the unique and specific possibilities of the new medium” and the invention of a technology preceding the appearance of an “artistic urge,” and that could call it into being (the concept Panofsky adapts from Riegl - *Kunstwollen*). A few salient points about Cavell’s critique are worth quoting as a reminder:

[...] the aesthetic possibilities of a medium are not givens. You can no more tell what will give significance to the unique and specific aesthetic possibilities of projecting photographic images by thinking about them or seeing some, than you can tell what will give significance to the possibilities of paint by thinking about paint, or looking some over. [...] the first moving pictures accepted as motion pictures were not applications of a medium that was defined by given possibilities, but the creation of a medium by their giving significance to specific possibilities [...] To discover ways of making sense is always a matter of the relation of an artist to his art, each discovering the other.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> (Panofsky 1997b), p. 122. The affinity of the phrase “shapeless matter” with the Schiller passage I quoted earlier should be obvious.

<sup>74</sup> For Panofsky, traditional art is brought in to being by Quattrocento perspectivalism, and culminates with Michelangelo, while never quite achieving those heights following the onset of the Cartesian worldview. Cf. (Panofsky 1962), pp. 229-30. The Panofsky essay quoted earlier posits Quattrocento “decompartmentalization” as an ideal that in some sense might still guide scientific inquiry without questioning its dominance.

<sup>75</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 32., *passim*

In other words, Cavell's critique of Panofsky should imply that there is no monolithic conception of "traditional art," but insofar as there is one, the Quattrocento is special precisely in the sense that it is not yet in possession of such a conception, but in the process of discovering it, in and by the way in which particular works lend artistic significance to features of their medium. Cavell, of all people, should recognize perspective to be merely one of these features, being in and of itself no more than a "technology," even if in a different sense from photography. Individual works of Quattrocento art, insofar as the laws of the medium hold in general, should be considered exactly along the lines Hollywood film should be considered in its canonical period according to Cavell.

Although I call this an "oversight" on Cavell's part, it has profound reasons both within his conceptions of film and philosophy (as we have seen, the two are inseparable).

#### ***4.3. Perspective and Cavell's Anti-Cartesianism***

It is in fact not difficult to work out a long list of affinities between, on the one hand, Cavell's conception of "canonical" cinema, which now stands before us following the efforts of Section 3 of this paper as involving a form of naïve self-reflexivity, and, on the other hand, commonly recognized characteristics of Florentine art.

First, although the scholarship of Quattrocento art is particularly subject to ideological swings, no one would contest that one of its central concerns is with identifying the sense in which the art of this period represents, or participates in, the "new creation of the human" and the "refinding of innocence" as a secular-moral ideal rather than a theological one, as do the Remarriage Comedies according to Cavell.<sup>76</sup> Second, much like

<sup>76</sup> Further to this, there is a close parallel between reading the "acknowledgement" of materiality in Quattrocento painting as an element of the search for a secular conception of innocence, and Cavell's particular emphasis in his essay on *King Lear* (arguing for the play's establishing of the genre of Shakespearean tragedy in terms of an acknowledgement of "separateness") that this problematic transcends Christian morality. Cf. Cavell:

Is this a Christian play? If Cordelia resembles Christ, it is by having become fully human, by knowing her separateness, by knowing the deafness of miracles, and by nevertheless maintaining her love



the beginnings of film in Hollywood, the proliferation of genres and adjacent genres and their canonical paths of development and gradual exhaustion also characterize Quattrocento art. Third, the Quattrocento is also the best fit for Cavell's ideas about automatisms as natural to an art in its classical phase as it learns to "create significant objects in paint."<sup>77</sup> It is also a period centrally concerned with the everyday and the ordinary as a basis for art, and with the ennoblement of the ordinary as its purpose. Finally, Cavell's question about the pressure and stupidity of the Hollywood movie industry is closely matched by similar questions about the pressures of patronage, sponsorship, and command over iconographical meaning in Quattrocento art. In fact these are often so addressed by historians of Renaissance art, if not often enough, unfortunately, as an aesthetic question about the power of the medium of painting.<sup>78</sup>

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and the whole knowledge it brings. [...] one glimpses the possibility of a common human nature which each, in his own way, fails to achieve; or perhaps glimpses the idea that its gradual achievement is the admission of reflection in oneself of every theme a man exhibits. [...] Yet it makes us reflect that evil is not wrong when it thinks of itself as good, for at those times it recaptures a craving for goodness, an experience of its own innocence which the world rejects. (Cavell 2002), pp. 301-309. *passim*.

All of this would need to be made good by a philosophical criticism of Quattrocento painting, demonstrating the way in which the ambiguity of these paintings as to their secular vs. theological function in their "canonical" instances (e.g., classically, Masaccio's *Trinity*) is related to the way in which they declare themselves as paintings by "acknowledging" their material conditions of possibility in their use of perspective. This, , is a matter of further work on the way Cavell's theory of the medium provides us with a reading of traditional artworks. My current essay as whole is merely focused on establishing such a possibility for the philosophy of painting, while this note merely points out that a philosophical reading of Renaissance painting may have something to say about a question that is famously impossible to decide by traditional methods of art history, with arguments weighing equally for both "secularizing" and "theological" readings. In a sense, the historiography of art-historical scholarship pertaining to Renaissance painting is nothing but the history of this problem.

<sup>77</sup> A quick look at the features of "automatism" thought of as naturally applying to Quattrocento art in (Cavell 1979b), p. 107. suffices to make this point.

<sup>78</sup> One of the likely reasons why Cavell never addresses works of classical art is in fact quite obvious. In no other field of humanistic inquiry has scholarship and audience drift-

However, one of the key reasons why Cavell resists the investigation of these facts has to do with the very terms on which he identifies film as a modernist art. At the conclusion of Section 2, I suggested that “in due course” we will have to re-situate Cavell’s conviction as to the identity of the medium of traditional art with its physical basis in its “native context,” namely Cavell’s view of modernism. One of the aspects of modernist art for Cavell is precisely that

[...] modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art. (That is almost a definition of modernism, not to say its purpose).<sup>79</sup>

The key to how film does this is precisely what leads Cavell to ignore “perspective,” despite the fact that it is commonplace about photography that as a technology for creating an image it represents a perfected realization of the one point perspective construction of pictorial space.<sup>80</sup> For film can become an art for Cavell’s just on account of its ability to “overcome” Cartesian skepticism by its reliance on photography:

ted further apart than in the field of art-history, which is particularly true about the study of Renaissance painting. The very suggestion that philosophy may have something interesting to say about Renaissance painting counts as a “courting of outrageousness” on a far grander scale than the thesis that film can be philosophy. Cavell’s recurring lament that film is not a serious subject of study within the academy is precisely what distinguishes it from the study of art, which is one of the most elitistically protected fields. It may be useful to remind ourselves that Panofsky would not have agreed to this, and his reasons are not unrelated to Cavell’s identification of a capacity for criticism with a capacity for naïveté:

The interpretation of the *intrinsic meaning or content*, dealing with what we have termed ‘symbolical’ values instead of with *images, stories, and allegories*, requires something more than familiarity with specific *themes* or *concepts* as transmitted through literary sources. [...] To grasp these principles we need a mental faculty comparable to that of a diagnostician, - a faculty which I cannot describe better than by the rather discredited term ‘synthetic intuition,’ and which may be better developed in a talented layman than in an erudite scholar. (Panofsky 1962), p. 15.

<sup>79</sup> (Cavell 2002), p. 189.

<sup>80</sup> Cf.: for instance (Friedberg 2006).

At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation. [...] Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.<sup>81</sup>

Although much can be said about this passage in connection with our topic, the point I want to make is simply that the power of film as an art is here described as being defined for Cavell by its anti-Cartesian thrust.<sup>82</sup> Taken together with Cavell's implicit acceptance of Panofsky's characterization of Quattrocento perspective as essentially Cartesian, it accounts for Cavell's implicit rejection of film's kinship with Quattrocento art. Film's ability to speak to us, moderns, derives precisely from this ontological reversal enabling it to remain a "traditional art", i.e., to become truly modernist in the positive, optimistic, forward looking sense associated by Michael Fried with Manet's painting of the 1960's. *Based on Cavell's own theory of the medium, film in its "overcoming" of skepticism by coming to consciousness of itself as a modernist realization of traditional art should also reveal all "traditional art" as having been anti-Cartesian, in its recurring "classical" phases, from its very beginnings.*

The negation of a Cartesian humanism by film involved in this ontological shift is further thematized by Cavell in the way film represents a "re-

<sup>81</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p.22. Film does not literally overcome skepticism, showing it to be false (at any rate, one of the key insights of Cavell's early philosophy is that skepticism is not merely indefeasible, but that it is really an ever present narcissistic threat by readily providing self-delusional justification for the denial of my acknowledgment of other minds), but it "makes our displacement from nature appear as our natural condition." Ibid., p.41. That is, it confirms us in our lostness to the world and tries to do something meaningful with it artistically speaking. Cf., also: "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." Ibid., p.119.

<sup>82</sup> A good summary, although again in a mode that seems slightly ambiguous, about the general anti-Cartesian tenor of Cavell's philosophy is given by Bernstein in op.cit. p. 110. (Bernstein himself calls his sketch a "caricature.")

versal of the myth of Faust” in “making displacement appear as our natural condition.”<sup>83</sup> (Film posits man as desiring to be absent from the world, and powerless, and confirming him in this desire as a natural one – quite the reverse of Faust’s desires). It is, paradoxically, precisely Cavell’s reliance on the capacity of photography to confront us with “reality” in this way, due to the ontological anomaly introduced by this technology into the world, that leads Cavell to ignore the artistic meaning of photography being so profoundly tied to the equally anti-Cartesian, because pre-Cartesian use of perspective in Renaissance painting that I would like to demonstrate in the conclusion of this section within Piero’s art by Tarkovsky’s reading.

My simple suggestion is that it would not be surprising to expect that precisely film being both the “last traditional art” and a modernist art at

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<sup>83</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 41.

The connection between film and Quattrocento art should also be furnished for Cavell himself by his own linking of the reverse-Faustian condition of film to Cavell’s equally reverse-Faustian call for a modernist philosophical naïveté elsewhere in his work:

I would need, in accounting [for the predicament of making aesthetic judgments], to provide a characterization of this sense of incapacity *and* provide the reason for our insistence upon putting it into words. I find that, at the start of this experience, I do not want to give voice to it (or do not see what voice to give it) but only to point (to others, or rather to the fact, or the being, of others) and to gesture towards my self. Only what is there to point to or gesture towards, since everything I know you know? It shows; everything in our world shows it. But I am filled with this feeling – of our separateness, let us say – and I want you to have it too. So I give voice to it. And then my powerlessness presents itself as ignorance – a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack. (Reverse Faust, I take the bargain of supernatural ignorance.) (Cavell 2002), p. 263 (The passage is from: *Knowing and Acknowledging*).

It is precisely in the spirit of such a need for naïveté in philosophy that Cavell rejects the claims of Cartesian skepticism as an epistemological position for aesthetics altogether, and without any further ado in *More of the World Viewed* as “depending upon theories (of knowledge, of science, or art, of reality, of realism) whose power to convince is hardly greater than reality’s own.” (Cavell 1979b), p. 165. Yet another example illustrating Cavell’s Copernican turn towards the practice of naïveté.

the same time, and as a form of philosophy, could teach us how to look at “traditional art.” It is enabled to do so precisely in terms of its ability to remain “traditional art” in virtue of the anti-Cartesian essence it is revealed to possess, due, in turn, to its defeat of skepticism. And with this, I hope we are ready turn to Tarkovsky.

#### **4.4. Tarkovsky's *Piero***

Although Renaissance paintings appear in each and every one of Tarkovsky's films, I consider the instance in *Nostalghia* a summation and culmination of the director's evocation of painting by film. In the typical instances of Tarkovsky's filmings of paintings, the works of art will never make their appearance as a physical object in its entirety, only in terms of some section of its painted surface filling the screen. The camera in most cases scans the painting at a pace set by classical music, interrupted and resumed by several cuts. These apparitions, as we may call them, usually take place as self-contained, one-off interruptions of the narrative, except in the case of Andrei Rublyev where his icons conclude the film.<sup>84</sup> *Nostalghia* is Tarkovsky's only film where we both encounter the *Madonna del Parto* in its physical presence (although in an artificially modified environment, and possibly not filmed in its original version, but as a reproduction)

<sup>84</sup> Film's invocation of Rublyev's original work in its closing sequence comments both on the child's, Boriska's having “trusted ahead of the trusting” in lying about having inherited the knowledge of crafting Church bells from his father (evoking a Cavellian condition of modernism by the unavailability of tradition, and having to reinvent it), and it equally figures as the result of Andrei's awakening from his vow of silence, the regaining of his “voice,” induced by his earlier witnessing of human cruelty: an achievement of a second naïveté through watching the child's work unfold. It results in a return of Andrei's faith in his own work: “giving pleasure by his painting to the people.” It is in terms of the fictional Andrei's achievement of second naïveté that Tarkovsky reads the birth of the Renaissance style in Russian painting in the real Rublyev's works. It is already difficult to say in this instance whether the painting is more of a comment on the meaning of the film, or vice versa: I think the only answer is that the two belong together in a unity, just as inseparably as Cavell's two “responses” do to the question about what a medium of an art is. The coming into being of the art of painting is here already equated with film's own search for its essence as a poetic genre for Tarkovsky. The way in which this self-recognition of film is based on exploiting a possibility of the medium which is only fully revealed by *Nostalghia*'s identification with Piero's Madonna, as I explain below.

[FIGURE 1], as well as in the “usual” mode as an apparition mediated by the lenses of the camera.



FIGURE 1. Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del parto* (detail), 1459-67, Chapel of the Cemetery, Monterchi.

To understand the significance of this doubleness, we first need to consider Cavell's acknowledgement in the *Foreword to the Expanded Edition* of *The World Viewed* of a certain Heideggerian possibility of cinema:

Malick [read: Tarkovsky, p.h.] 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. Objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins. Their presence refers to their absence, their location in another place.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> (Cavell 1979b), pp. xv-xvi.

While it goes without saying that Cavell's thought is an obvious starting point for discussing Tarkovsky's pervasive and mesmerizing use of filmic still-lives, composed of commonplace physical objects and water [FIGURE 2], we also need another Cavell thought – this time about painting from *The World Viewed* – to complement how we might think about the physical presence of *painting* in Tarkovsky's films:

It could be said that what painting wanted, in wanting connection with reality, was a sense of *presentness* – not exactly of the world's presence to us, but of our presence to it.<sup>86</sup> [...] Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past.<sup>87</sup>



FIGURE 2. Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Solaris: Still Life*, 1972.

<sup>86</sup> Cavell's footnoted reference to Fried's *Art and Objecthood* is confusing in the light of the fact that Cavell is talking about *classical* painting, whereas his analysis of Colour Field Painting in a later chapter of his book is a discussion of the price painting as an art had to pay in order to "maintain our presence to the world." However, it is important to remember that Fried in that essay also writes in defense of a highly traditional conception of art, which he shares with Cavell. See (Fried 1998).

<sup>87</sup> (Cavell 1979b), p. 23.

Besides acknowledging nostalgia as a condition of film (a “possibility of the medium” declared by Tarkovsky’s movie in its very title), Cavell is implying by this passage that paintings are very special kind of physical objects in that they are capable of confirming our *presentness* to the world. Putting this together with Cavell’s remarks on Heidegger, I think we can formulate an astounding Cavellian ontological conclusion about Tarkovsky’s filming of paintings, which to my mind describes exactly the experience of viewing them. The filming of these paintings, and the way they fill the canvas instance an almost revelatory or religious sense of oneness with the physical world: they are a kind of enhanced still life: enhanced because in the final instance their subject is not merely *physical*, but *human* reality: the only kind of reality of any real concern to art, both for Cavell and for Tarkovsky, and a specific problem for film in any of its classical genres, being based on a technology of automatism that excludes the human hand. Because film *maintains the presentness of the world* (while accepting our absence from it), but painting at the same time maintains *our presentness to it*, we can read these instances of Tarkovsky’s films as moments of ontological ecstasy: an elimination of the possibility of skeptical doubt altogether from the experience of how we are conscious of the physical reality of the world in viewing these paintings through the lense of Tarkovsky’s camera. It is as if Tarkovsky’s filmings of these images, Piero’s Madonna in particular were intended as direct confirmations of Cavell’s astounding definition of painting already quoted in Section 2:

Painting, being art, is revelation; it is revelation because it is acknowledgement; being acknowledgement, it is knowledge, of itself, and of the world.<sup>88</sup>

Tarkovsky’s filmings discover that there is no other artistic medium besides film capable of conveying through images Cavell’s thought connecting art, revelation, acknowledgement, self-reflexivity, and the cognitive power of art. More specifically, no other possibility seems to exist than the filming of an instance of classical painting. Works of Quattrocento art become a natural subject already in this abstract sense: by being engaged in defining their media as works created under the aegis of a new ontological

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<sup>88</sup> *emph*Op. cit., p. 110.



purpose, they exist in the natural mode of self-reflexivity foregrounding their own mode of existence as revelations in both the Christian and secular sense. However, Tarkovsky also takes the decisive next step, in a way that allows us to take the most “canonical” instance of his filmings as a confirmation of the materiality of painting itself as the specific subject of the acknowledgment painting as an art is capable of.

Piero's painting appears in the very first sequence of *Nostalghia*. The human subject of this sequence is the male protagonist's female companion – Eugenia – wondering by chance into the middle of a fictional ritual in an equally fictional church housing Piero's miracle-working Madonna for the purpose of this sequence. I read the sacristan's suggestion to the Eugenia that she should kneel down in front of the painting (whereas she merely wants to look at it: “*sono qui solo per guardare*”) as an instruction (hopeless in her case) that to find a happy marriage as a character in film, she would have to integrate her knowledge or awareness of her body with a kind of spirituality represented by Quattrocento painting, and Piero's work in particular; a condition which in turn one might describe as a re-finding of innocence. While film itself is capable of escaping the Cartesian perspectival web of columns that frame, and envelop the painting, to unite materially with Piero's Madonna, Eugenia herself remains imprisoned in obsession with her body, and ends in a “marriage” with a shady character (with some slight resemblance to Tarkovsky himself). The marriage itself is represented as a form of immobilization or imprisonment.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> For an excellent, detailed account of how the church was constructed to host the filming of the painting, as well as the whole history of Tarkovsky's encounter with Piero's work, see, (Macgillivray 2003). Unfortunately Macgillivray seems to offer no interpretation of Tarkovsky's filming, apart from what feels like a plagiarization of Hubert Damisch's suggestion that the painting represents a Freudian fetishization of pregnancy, which is “devastating for Eugenia” (Damisch is unmentioned by Macgillivray in his bibliography). Here, as elsewhere, a naïve reading in Cavellian mode is clearly helpful in escaping “embarrassed bursts of theory,” (Cavell) and coming to similar conclusions without the need for invoking concepts that are significantly more obscure than the images they are meant to explain, however multi layered. Damisch's equally testing study (which is nevertheless rewarding for its erudition) of Piero's painting originally appeared in French in 1997, but was only translated into English in 2007. See (Damisch 2007).



FIGURE 3. Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del parto*, 1459-67,  
Chapel of the Cemetery, Monterchi.

Piero's Madonna is an instance of the Piero type [FIGURE 3]: a type of ideal human being of his own creation, the type for which he is sometimes described as an enigmatic painter. My reading of this type is that in being an embodied creature, youthful, ungended, halfway human, but too beautiful and distant to be entirely so, it represents the very purpose of perspective for Piero, namely to construct paintings that are underwritten by the mathematical certainty of the revelation of truth in order to represent a moral world of purity promised by painting. In other words, this painting

is a prime example, if not a culminating statement of Piero's entirely anti-Cartesian use of Albertian perspective, which both affirms the material-physical existence of the painted surface in its use of almost "sculpted" human bodies whose arrangements create the space itself. Piero is also pre-Cartesian in his understanding of the "knowledge" to be gained from perspective as purely moral, although in virtue of the embodied nature of his art, a form of sensual knowledge, call this Piero's own version, to my mind truer and more authentic than Panofsky's, of Alberti's *la piu grassa Minerva*. Piero's angelic humans are the promise of this world, and the promise of Quattrocento art to accomplish the "new creation of the human" that the modernist art of film in its classical phase continues directly in a different medium.

Piero's explicit perspectival efforts (with significant exceptions) are almost entirely taken up by the representation of the human body, and in that sense the *Madonna del Parto* – which is a highly self-reflexive painting indicating itself as the revelation of the space painting is capable of, a divine revelation of Mary's presence, as well as the revelation of her mystical pregnancy – is as much a statement about perspective, or the meaning of perspective as any superficially more Cartesian looking work, where all the transversals, orthogonals as well as the vanishing point remain highly visible.

To mention just one more detail about Piero's painting: the two angels are mirror images created by the flipping of the cardboard schema prepared for transferring the design to the wall. I would not put it past Tarkovsky to have also discovered the meaning of the two mirrored angels, *in this particular painting for this particular film*, as standing for the inverse relationship of painting and film itself – one pre-Cartesian, the other post-Cartesian – engaged in the same kind of "revelation" of the somatic miracle of an art capable of renewing our conception of the human.

That Tarkovsky's film finds its inspiration to engage with this painting precisely on account of its anti-Cartesian aspirations finds its confirmation in the quest of the protagonist: Andrei. The writer-director-hero embodies the very condition of film: nostalgia and a privacy whose fantasies he finds impossible to make "public". His quest takes him to Italy, to Bagno Vignoni, where he encounters crazy Domenico, a former maths teacher, who – being a half-wit – is clearly the victim of a failed anti-Cartesian ex-

periment represented by the complete negation of any necessity of a mathematical world view in the form of a giant inscription of  $1+1=1$  on the walls of his dilapidated house where he kept his children locked away from the world [FIGURE 4].



FIGURE 4. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Nostalghia*, 1983.

Domenico's House:  $1+1=1$ .

It is this house that Andrei must visit, and survive the visit without being tempted to follow Domenico into madness but still learn something: to understand how to mend his broken trust in film as an art. As he enters Domenico's lair the camera takes over for us to identify our vision with his, and what we see is both a window, and an overgrowth of moss, water, and mud leading up to it [FIGURE 5].

It looks like a landscape, and the camera's take on it is such that I can only read it as an image of Leonardo's famous advice to budding painters on how to observe cracks in the wall, and other such random products of nature to learn how to project images into paint. It is an acknowledgment of the material medium of painting. What Andrei is learning and we

learn with him is just the kind of Heideggerian significance for film, and for painting, of sheer materiality that Cavell articulates. What Andrei learns is that to overcome his fear of visiting Piero's Madonna he needs to understand precisely the intrinsic relationship of film and Quattrocento painting in terms of their anti-Cartesian affirmation of materiality. We also learn what it was that Eugenia failed to learn or understand about painting, but which only film can reveal to us. If Andrei Tarkovsky's fictional namesake necessarily fails to transpose his insights into creative work, the film ends with a promise that his quest to re-find some kind of faith in art – some form of second innocence or naïveté has not been completely rejected, but that it is certainly only film, and what film can teach us, that could carry the flame of this achieved hope to its final destination.



FIGURE 5. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Nostalghia*, 1983.  
Domenico's House: The "Landscape".

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