

**MORE REAL THAN REALITY?
HEIDEGGER AND CAVELL ON FILM'S
POWERS OF ABSORPTION¹**

*Mais Real que a Realidade?
Heidegger e Cavell Sobre os Poderes
de Absorção do Filme*

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*...people whom nothing moves or
touches any longer are taught to
cry again by films.*

Walter Benjamin (2016, p. 77)

RESUMO

O poder das imagens (paradas e em movimento) de nos absorver às vezes as faz parecer mais reais do que a realidade. Seguindo os passos de Martin Heidegger e Stanley Cavell, este artigo tenta dar sentido histórico e filosófico a esse sentimento, remontando-o a mudanças de época em nossa experiência que começaram com o advento da modernidade. Depois de destacar as implicações e os custos dessas mudanças, aponto para formas alternativas de relação com a realidade que ainda estão disponíveis para nós, e argumento que (alguns) filmes podem ajudar a abri-las.

Palavras-chave: Cavell. Ceticismo. Heidegger. Mundo Como Image. Tecnologia.

ABSTRACT

The power of (still and moving) pictures to absorb us sometimes makes them feel more real than reality. Following in the footsteps of Martin Heidegger and Stanley Cavell, this paper tries to make historical and philosophical sense of that feeling, tracing it back to epochal changes in our experience that started with the advent of modernity. After highlighting the implications and costs of those changes I point to alternative ways of relating to reality which are still available to us, and argue that (some) films can help open them up.

Key-words: Skepticism. World as Picture. Technology. Heidegger. Cavell.

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1. THE POWER OF PICTURES AND THE POWERLESSNESS OF REALITY

In the last few decades we have seen an unprecedented explosion in the production and consumption of pictures. As we quickly transitioned from an era in which photographs were mostly seen in portraits and family albums to one of massive reproducibility in printed newspapers and magazines, then to the era of moving pictures in (analog) film and television, and, finally, to the digital age of instant sharing in social media apps and streaming services, pictures became simply ubiquitous in our lives. As a result of such a ubiquitousness, our experience of reality itself became inextricably informed, mediated and shaped by pictures – still or moving, seen, remembered or imagined³. Thus, what not so long ago were opportunities to reconnect to an external and independent world – gathering with friends and family, traveling, visiting museums or enjoying nature – increasingly became occasions to emulate, reenact or improve upon so many *pictures* of those moments. We don't simply want to go to San Francisco, say, but we want to see (and preferably take pictures of) all of those "attractions" that we remember from so many movies, TV shows and advertisements. Even a humble walk in the park can become a well-planned routine – scripted, produced and enacted, if not recorded and edited, soundtrack and all. More tellingly, even in those rare cases in which we decide *not* to take our recording devices with us, we will often find ourselves unable to simply look at something, instead thinking "what a good picture this would make", "how cinematic it is", and so on.

But pictures not only shape our experience of reality; sometimes they feel more real than reality itself. This phenomenon was already being explored by Walter Benjamin in his well-known essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility":

Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception

³ For an insightful analysis of the role of photography in this change, see Susan Sontag's "In Plato's Cave" (1977, p. 3-24).

is organized – the medium in which it occurs, is conditioned not only by nature but by history. (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 104. Italics in the original.)

But how exactly has our perception been conditioned by history – specifically by recent developments in the technologies of reproducibility of pictures? Commenting on the passage I just quoted, Mathew Abbot offers a clear illustration of this phenomenon:

I have had the experience of finding that some of my vivid “memories” are not really memories at all. It is the experience of going through family photos or videos, or perhaps of looking at photographs of a holiday: one realises that something one has taken as a memory is actually a memory of a photograph or video recording. This isn’t to say that there is no real memory, but rather that one’s memory has been infiltrated and even supplanted, and cannot be accessed without the mediation of that image. The media of photography, film, and/or video can get inside one’s experience in this way [...] (ABBOTT 2016, p. 8).

As Abbott goes on to say, “the problem also works in reverse”:

seeing an image of something before actually encountering it can influence our experience of, and distance us from, the object in question. The easy example is the *Mona Lisa*: one might say that it is now impossible really to see this painting (this is almost literally true, in that it attracts massive crowds of tourists, many of whom, interestingly, will be taking photos of the painting), that there is a disappointment that comes with encountering it, a feeling of not having encountered the real thing. Photographic and cinematic reproductions of reality have a paradoxical effect on us: they simultaneously offer us views of reality, of the world as it is in itself, while also working to remove those things from us, making an unmediated experience of reality impossible. (ABBOTT 2016, p. 9).

I can attest to both experiences, and I am willing to bet most readers will share them too. Some contemporary thinkers like Jean Baudrillard tried to make sense of this phenomenon by using the notion of “hyperreality” (1996, p. 22), which is supposed to grasp the way in which “entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life” (KELLNER 2020, *online*). Such is the extent to which photography and photographic based media

changed our experience that, in Baudrillard's estimation, they ended up leading to *the death of reality* by becoming more attractive and even "more real than reality" (1996, p. 28).

For some philosophical sensibilities, this talk about "the death of reality" and the advent of "hyperreality" will sound like rhetorical exaggeration, nothing to be taken too seriously or too literally; notwithstanding our widespread fascination with pictures – the retort would go – reality remains there, impassive, indifferent to our habits and fantasies, and any sane human being can tell the difference. In what follows I want to counteract this quick dismissal, arguing that the conception of reality and of its relations to human experience that it assumes is philosophically unsound. In order to do that I will draw on the work of two philosophers who reflected deeply about the sources of our modern (and post-modern) understanding of reality: Martin Heidegger and Stanley Cavell. By following in their footsteps I intend to articulate a middle-ground position between an unqualified proclamation of the death of reality and an unqualified dismissal of that possibility. Such a position will acknowledge and try to make historical and philosophical sense of what seems to be a true phenomenon – namely, our all but inevitable disappointment with reality caused by epochal changes in our experience of the world that took place after modernity – while simultaneously highlighting its true costs and pointing to alternative ways of relating to reality which (some) films can help open up.

2. HEIDEGGER ON THE DANGER OF EQUATING CINEMATIC PERCEPTIBILITY WITH REALITY

For a prolific writer centrally concerned with the role of art and technology in our current understanding of being, Martin Heidegger wrote surprisingly little about photographic and filmic based media – arguably the innovations that led to the most distinctive artistic developments of our technological age. The little he wrote is notoriously critical. As Shawn Loht usefully summarizes, one of the main reasons why Heidegger holds arts based in filmic media in low esteem has to do with the fact that:

the very possibility of widely disseminated, easily produced photographic representations risks giving a false impression to the mass of humanity that being is simply whatever can be captured on film. And the reverse also holds for Heidegger *mutatis mutandi*: film has a tendency to suggest that whatever it pictorially captures is true to reality. In other words, the modern appropriation of film has been one that regards the photographic image as co-extensive with beings, such that photographic “seeing” is regarded as a sure way to knowledge. (LOHT 2017, p. 30).

The negative assessment summarized above is explicitly (if somewhat obscurely) stated in the following passage, which comes from Heidegger’s 1943 course on Heraclitus:

The implementation of cinema in “school” (and above all in research) is an important and beneficial development; however, this process immediately leads to disaster if through it the opinion and attitude become solidified that only what “shows up on film” properly exists, an attitude not owed to cinema in and of itself, but rather to the context of contemporary reality [...] in which it takes place. [...] But the danger persists [...] that we will equate cinematic perceptibility with ‘reality.’ (HEIDEGGER 1994, p. 104).

But what exactly about “the context of contemporary reality” is responsible for this “danger” of equating reality or existence with “cinematically perceptibility”, according to Heidegger? The best way to start answering this question, I submit, is to go back to his essay “The Age of the World Picture”, particularly to its signature claim that “[t]he fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture” (1977, p. 134)⁴. What Heidegger is getting at in this context is a view that he explores in many of his later writings, concerning a specific stage in the development of our (Western) understanding of the essence of being. In very broad strokes, that development up to modernity can be summarized in three main steps⁵. The first step takes place soon after “the great age of the Greeks” (1977, p. 131), and it is paradigmatically exhibited in Plato’s definition of the essence of being as “eidos” (usually translated as “idea” or “form”),

⁴ Or, again: “The fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the new age.” (HEIDEGGER 1977, p. 130).

⁵ As we will soon see, a fourth step needs to be added to go from modernity to our current age, and that step will be investigated in other writings of Heidegger’s.

which implies that all there is in the physical, “sublunary” world would be a mere reflection or imitation of the eidetic originals (see 1977, p. 130-31). The second step occurs in the Middle Ages, when being becomes conceived as “*ens creatum*” and the Platonic hierarchy of being (organized in terms of proximity to “ideas”) is replaced by one organized in terms of proximity to God, conceived as the highest cause and the creator of all there is (see *ibid*). The third step occurs with the advent of Modernity, when *we* gradually take the place of God in the previous scheme, so that entities are no longer understood as creations stemming from His mind and will but rather as that which *stands before* us and is *represented* in our own minds. According to Heidegger, this development is expressed exemplarily in the metaphysics of Descartes, in which “[w]hat it is to be is for the first time defined as the objectiveness of representing, and truth is first defined as the certainty of representing” (1977, p. 127). In other words, “the world becomes picture”, and when that happens

what is, in its entirety, is juxtaposed as that for which man is prepared and which, correspondingly, he therefore intends to bring before himself and have before himself. *Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture.* What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth. (HEIDEGGER 1977, p. 129-30, my italics).

With this summary at hand, let us go back to the question of how this modern understanding of being could lead to the view that “only what ‘shows up on film’ properly exists” (HEIDEGGER 1994, p. 104). First, “the world conceived and grasped as picture” is a world essentially to be *perceived*, and as such fully within our reach, fully *knowable* and *controllable* as long as it is *representable*. Put differently, the world thus conceived is tailor made to our capacities of representation: whatever lies beyond our reach is as good as non-existent. Now, to the extent that photography and film (together with previous technological developments such as lenses, microscopes, telescopes, and so on) can be thought of as *extensions* of and *improvements* upon our natural capacities of representation, we could say that the status of

those artifacts as privileged ways of accessing reality is basically a matter of following the logical consequences of our modern understanding of being. And I take it that it is first and foremost to this aspect of filmic technology that Heidegger is alluding to when he speaks of “[t]he implementation of cinema in ‘school’ (and above all in research)” in the passage quoted above. Slowly but steadily, photographic and filmic records became the *paradigmatic* ways of proving the existence or reality of something – to mention just a few simple examples, think of the importance we tend to ascribe to the practice of registering special moments of our lives (e.g., marriage, travels, etc.) on film, or on the crucial role played by photographs and security camera footage in legal contexts, or again of the way in which physicists used to prove the existence of subatomic particles by registering their traces on film.

But that is not the end of the story; as film and filmic-based media developed and became ubiquitous in our lives, another change in our understanding of being gradually took place. Recall that in the modern view just summarized there is a fundamental distinction between *objects*, understood as what *stands before* us, and the *representing subjects*. In this view, nature is there for us to fully know and control, but there still is a crucial difference between *it* and *us*. However, this very distinction would be challenged as we transitioned to a further stage in the development of our understanding of being, which Heidegger calls our “technological age”. What characterizes this age is that in it all there is is conceived as “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*):

Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. The word expresses here something more, and something more essential, than mere “stock.” The name “standing reserve” assumes the rank of an inclusive rubric. It designates nothing less than the way in which everything presences that is wrought upon by the challenging revealing. Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object. (HEIDEGGER 1977, p. 17).

The fundamental change I want to emphasize here is expressed in the last sentence of the passage just quoted; in a sense, according to Heideg-

ger, when being is understood and experienced as “standing-reserve”, the very distinction between *objects* and representing *subjects* is gradually erased⁶. Importantly, this change is also expressed in the way we came to think about *ourselves*: gone is the modern, somewhat privileged position of the “representing subject”, and in its place comes the view that we are nothing but assets or supplies – literally, “human resources” – to be optimized as part of the global “standing-reserve”:

Only to the extent that man for his part is already challenged to exploit the energies of nature can this ordering revealing happen. If man is challenged, ordered, to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve? The current talk about human resources, about the supply of patients for a clinic, gives evidence of this. The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines. The latter, in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that a set configuration of opinion becomes available on demand. (HEIDEGGER 1977, p. 18).

Now, if it is true that the printing press and newspapers make opinions (and, importantly, also its “emitters”) *available on demand*, what to think of televised news and (closer to our time) YouTube and social media “influencers”? Although Heidegger himself did not live long enough to experience the latter, one can clearly devise a path leading from the situation he was experiencing and describing to where we are today. For example, here is what he says about the way some of the twentieth-century’s key innovations in telecommunications were producing a sort of loss of meaning⁷:

When the farthest corner of the globe has been conquered technologically and can be exploited economically; when any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like; when you can simultaneously “experience” an assassination at-

⁶ This change is expressed in German by contrasting the permanency of a *Gegenstand* (usually translated as “object”, but more literally something like “that which stands over against”) with the orderability, availability and replaceability of a *Bestand*. On this point, see the translator’s note on (HEIDEGGER 1977 p. 17, fn. 16).

⁷ I was pointed to these passages by LOHT 2013 — a paper to which I am much indebted.

tempt against a king in France and a symphony concert in Tokyo; when time is nothing but speed, instantaneity, and simultaneity, and time as history has vanished from all *Dasein* of all peoples; [...] there still looms like a specter over all this uproar the question: what for?—where to?—and what then? (HEIDEGGER 2000, p. 40).

Shrinking of distances, speed, instant availability, simultaneity (and, I would add ephemerality) are precisely the marks of most of our communications in an age of Twitter, YouTube and other social media. Again, although this situation already began with the advent of the printing press and with its massive dissemination of news, filmic-based media had a profound impact in making it even more compelling, basically second-nature to most of us. In a passage from the 1950 lecture entitled “The Thing,” Heidegger himself makes this connection with film:

All distances in time and space are shrinking. ... The germination and growth of plants, which remained hidden throughout the seasons, is now exhibited publicly in a minute, on film. Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today’s street traffic. Moreover, the film attests to what it shows by presenting also the camera and its operators at work. (HEIDEGGER 2001, p. 163).

In other words, the advent of *film* (and filmic based media) seems to be responsible for accelerating a change that was already happening in our culture, having to do with a craving to make the whole world (past, present and future) instantly available for our ends⁸. No wonder, given this fact, that *filmic* reality would come to feel as “more real” than (non-filmic) reality itself: if “reality” (or, in Heidegger’s preferred jargon, “being”) is already conceived first as “picture” (something to be represented) and then as “standing-reserve” (something readily available, infinitely flexible, etc.), it stands to reason that whatever is closer to fulfil that role should be given a privileged status. And this takes us back to the *Mona Lisa* example from our first section: *of course* high-definition, interactive, hyperlinked, digital, mobile, etc., *reproductions* of the *Mona Lisa* are *more available* to a myriad of diffe-

⁸ Although this will not be the focus of this paper, it is important to notice that the process of *digitization* of (what once were) filmic based media can be seen as a further step in the same direction. Thus the widespread dictum “the world at your fingertips”, used to describe the kind of instant availability made possible by digitization and high-speed mobile networks and devices.

rent ends than *the painting itself*. Therefore, going back to what Heidegger called the “danger [...] that we will equate cinematic perceptibility with ‘reality’”⁹, I think these considerations not only allow us to conclude that this danger is already upon us, but that in a sense it became the *standard* way we now see things.

3. STANLEY CAVELL AND FILM AS THE EMBLEM OF MODERN SKEPTICISM

North-American philosopher Stanley Cavell, inspired in part by Heidegger’s views, has presented a diagnosis which is very congenial to the one summarized in the preceding section in his seminal book on the ontology of film, *The World Viewed* (1979)¹⁰. The following passage articulates the main findings of his investigation perspicuously:

I have spoken of film as satisfying the wish for the magical reproduction of the world by enabling us to view it unseen. What we wish to see in this way is the world itself—that is to say, everything. Nothing less than that is what modern philosophy has told us (whether for Kant’s reasons, or for Locke’s, or Hume’s) is metaphysically beyond our reach or (as Hegel or Marx or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche might rather put it) beyond our reach metaphysically. To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self. [...] Viewing a movie makes this condition automatic, takes the responsibility for it out of our hands. Hence movies seem more natural than reality. (CAVELL 1979, p. 101-2).

The notion of a “wish for the magical reproduction of the world” echoes previous ideas from André Bazin, concerning (what he construed as) humanity’s more or less atemporal craving for “the creation of an ideal

⁹ (Heidegger 1994, p. 104)

¹⁰ The very title of Cavell’s book, as he acknowledges in the Preface, was partially inspired by his knowledge of Heidegger’s essay “The Age of the World View,” as well as from his knowledge of “a range of issues” from *Being and Time* — namely “that ours is an age in which our philosophical grasp of the world fails to reach beyond our taking and holding views of it, and we call these views metaphysics” (CAVELL 1979, p. xxiii). I explore part of this Heideggerian inheritance in (TECHIO 2019).

world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny”, hence freed from corruption (see BAZIN 1967, p. 9-10). Many readers who notice this Bazinian inspiration¹¹ are quick to locate Cavell’s views squarely within what became known as a “realist” view of the ontology of film. However, as I hope the passage quoted above makes clear in this connection, Cavell is here much closer to Heidegger in arguing that the wish that was *finally* satisfied by film has a particular historical origin – namely (Western) modernity, and with it the understanding of ourselves as representing subjects metaphysically separated from the world and its objects. Hence the idea that “[o]ur condition *has become* one in which our natural mode of perception is to view [...] from behind the self” (my italics). As Cavell puts in an earlier passage:

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. (CAVELL 1979, p. 22).

As we saw in section 2, Heidegger argued that there were other ways of understanding ourselves and our relation to the world before modernity, and he also claimed that we are right now at another crossroad, transitioning to a view in which even the distinction between subjects and objects is gradually being dissolved. Although Cavell is less explicit about this later development, his analysis of the ontology of photography and film is much more detailed and sophisticated than Heidegger’s (at least to my mind), and therefore I think comparing their views is a good strategy for us to understand more clearly the connections and the mutual reinforcement between changes in our worldview and changes in our technologies of production, reproduction and consumption of pictures.

With that in mind, let us go back to Cavell’s views on how the advent of photography and film relates to our modern worldview. According to him, one of the distinctive features of modernity was the unprecedented emphasis placed upon the problem of *knowledge*, particularly regarding our connection to (what became construed as) “the external world” and “other minds”. Given that emphasis, the main task of philosophy came to be that of

¹¹ Explicitly acknowledged by Cavell himself — see, e.g., (1979, p. xxiii and p. 16).

obtaining or securing *certainty* for our set of beliefs or, more generally, *representations*. In Cavell's estimation, it is precisely this fixation with certainty (which has as its *locus classicus* Descartes's *Meditations*) that ended up leading to the feeling of isolation and loss of contact with external reality that he identifies as being at the basis of our modern, skeptical worldview¹². Coming to the scene at a later stage in this historical development, photography promised a novel way to overcome subjectivity, "by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction" (CAVELL 1979, p. 23). Photography, Cavell claims, maintains the presentness of the world precisely by accepting *our* absence and separation from it, by standing before ourselves as a kind of window to (a past portion of) the world that was created *automatically*, without the mediation of our subjectivity, hence more or less exactly in the way modern skepticism taught us to expect of an objective representation capable of satisfying our craving for certainty.

The point I want to emphasize here (perhaps even more than Cavell himself did in his analysis) is that it is precisely because that skeptical picture of our relation to the real was already in place — because, as Heidegger argued, we had already interpreted *the world* as *picture*¹³, something to be seen or viewed as if from the outside, while we ourselves are unseen and absent — that the advent of photography could be felt as the achievement we were hoping for since modernity. It is in this sense that, according to Cavell, our relation to photographs (and later to film) literalizes or emblemizes a view of our relationship to *the world itself* that has been assumed to be our default epistemological position since modernity. As Richard Rushton usefully summarizes:

Part of our modern condition [...] is that we feel cut off from the world; we can trust only our own senses and our own thoughts, but even these are difficult to trust, for we lack the objective criteria by virtue of which we might be able to trust even our own senses. Hence the importance of movies: movies screen reality in much the same way as reality itself, for reality, from our modern perspective, is always already screened. (RUSHTON 2011, p. 115)

¹² See CAVELL 1987, p. 94.

¹³ HEIDEGGER 1997, p. 129-130.

In other words, photography (and, subsequently, film) could only satisfy our wish for “an objective relation to reality” once connecting to the world by having views of it has become “our natural mode of perception” (CAVELL, 1979, p. 102)¹⁴. And once we start feeling at home from behind our own selves this way, it is only one small step further to become used to seeing the world (and ourselves) from behind our devices for recording and reproducing reality. This last step, which I take to be at least hinted at in Cavell’s work, is the one that finally takes us up to what Heidegger called our technological age, in which both the world (which already became “picture”) and ourselves (which already became “representing subjects”) ultimately become digitally commodified as part of the global standing-reserve of data ready to be used for any instrumental purpose.

Are we, then, inexorably destined to live in a “hyperreal” world in which (digital) pictures become at least as real, if not more so, than (what we formerly thought of as) “reality itself”? Perhaps not, but escaping this destiny would involve great effort, as any attempt at overcoming what feels like our “natural condition” must. In the next section I will delineate some of the conditions of possibility for such an effort, inspired initially by the work of Heidegger but trying to go beyond it in finding a *positive* role for film in that enterprise, a case in point being offered by Cavell’s reading of a specific film.

4. FILM’S POTENTIAL TO OPEN UP A NEW RELATION TO REALITY

The preceding analysis of Heidegger’s and Cavell’s diagnoses of our current worldview should help us make sense of two interrelated tendencies that seem to be deeply ingrained in our collective mind, namely: (i) film’s

¹⁴ As Martin Woessner elaborates: “For Cavell, film was captivating precisely because it offered us the world itself [...]. But what is significant about this achievement is that it displaces the burden of making the world. Film offers us the world whole, its horizons ready-made. But it is a world beyond us, outside us, a world we do not fully know. Of the world, film reminds us that ‘we are displaced from our natural habitation with it, placed at a distance from it.’ According to Cavell, ‘The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition’ ([CAVELL 1979, p.] 41). By externalizing the world for us, film relieves us of the burden of making the world, the burden of human freedom that — as Heidegger suggested in *The Essence of Reasons* — was the groundless ground of *Dasein*.” (WOESSNER 2011, p. 142).

(or, more generally, filmic-based media's) unprecedented power to engage and absorb us and (ii) reality's unprecedented power~~lessness~~ to do the same. I now want to point to a possible way out of this predicament. To do that, I will highlight some artistic capabilities of film that were left unexplored hitherto, and which should help us see that at least some films can be more than a consummation of our modern (and post-modern) condition. In a nutshell, the thought I want to explore in this section is the following: granted, film can become phenomenologically "more real" or more absorbing than reality *if* our fundamental relation to the world is construed as one of representing or "taking views" of it, as it has since modernity; that construal, in turn, is the seed for our technological understanding of being as "standing-reserve", which takes us one step further, towards the digital commodification of human beings themselves; but what if other ways of relating to the world were still available to us presently? Could then our relation to cinematic representations of the world in films that acknowledge those possibilities help open up an alternative way of being-in-the-world?

As is well known, Heidegger himself has suggested that there are other, *freer* alternatives to our default understanding of being in the technological age (see, e.g., 1977, p. 3), and in so doing he emphasized in particular the role of artworks, understood not as something to be "enjoyed aesthetically"¹⁵ or as "a sector of cultural activity" but as "a revealing that brought forth and hither, and therefore belonged within *poiesis*" (1977, p. 34). Heidegger exemplifies this "*poietical*" understanding of the artwork referring us back to "that brief but magnificent time" of ancient Greece, when "the arts soared to the supreme height of the revealing granted them" and "brought the presence [*Gegenwart*] of the gods, brought the dialogue of divine and human destinings, to radiance" (1977, p. 34). Commenting on these suggestive but obscure passages, Richard Rojcewicz articulates Heidegger's point as follows:

The Greeks did not surround themselves with art for subjective reasons, i.e., for the sake of an elevation of their experience. The Greeks did not "appreciate" art, at least not in the etymological sense of valuing it for that which it brings "in return." Art was not something that brought

¹⁵ On the aestheticization of our experience of art since modernity, see n. 25 below.

returns; it had a higher provenance than human creativity and a higher function than refinement or culture. If art is there merely to be appreciated, then it has been debased, brought down to the human, subjective level. For Heidegger, in the first epoch of history humanity is not the measure of art; Being is. Art is under the sway of the self-disclosure of Being. Art in the first epoch is “pious,” submissive to Being, not submissive to humans. That, in very broad strokes, characterizes the Greek approach to art as ontological rather than humanistic. (ROJCEWICZ 2006, p. 187).

According to Rojcewicz, therefore, one useful way of framing Heidegger’s objective in the technology essay is precisely as trying to make us aware of the possibility of relating to being in this “pious” way, hence inverting out current understanding in terms of constant availability for our human ends (see 2006 *passim*). Art, understood as a way of disclosing being, will play a fundamental role to that end. But in order for that to be possible, Heidegger argues that we must first open ourselves up for a different, freer relation towards technology itself. Recall that, for Heidegger, technology is *in essence* a mode of revealing or disclosing being; but, also according to him, “[a]ll revealing belongs within a harboring and concealing” (1977, p. 25), and what great artworks do is precisely to remind us of this *constant struggle between revealing and concealing*. In his essay on the origin of the work of art, Heidegger elaborates on this point by describing the essential role of an artwork as being that of opening up a *world* by rooting it in the *earth*:

That into which the work sets itself back, and thereby allows to come forth, is what we called “the earth.” Earth is the coming-forth-concealing [*Hervorkommend-Bergende*]. Earth is that which cannot be forced, that which is effortless and untiring. On and in the earth, historical man founds his dwelling in the world. In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. “Setting forth [*Hers-tellen*]” is to be thought, here, in the strict sense of the word. The work moves the earth into the open of a world and holds it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth*. (HEIDEGGER, 2002, p. 24).

The ontological understanding of the artwork summarized in this dense passage is elucidated throughout Heidegger’s essay mainly by means of a contrast between the function of artworks, on the one hand, and the function of our technological devices and equipment, on the other. Accord-

ding to Heidegger, when an artwork is (ontologically) *at work* opening up worlds – as opposed to merely functioning as “standing-reserve”, say as yet another piece of decoration, as an investment, and so on – its matter is never *totally used up*, meaning that it never becomes totally *available* and *transparent* for our ends, as the matter of equipment does. As Theodor Kiesel usefully summarizes:

The production of equipment is finished when a material has been sufficiently formed to have it ready for use. The equipment’s readiness for use means that it is released beyond itself to disappear into usefulness. In the artwork, by contrast, its matter is not used up and does not disappear but is rather set forth as earth into the openness of the world. Rather than using up words in the manner of everyday discourse, the poet uses the word “such that the word truly becomes a word and remains a word” in all its glory and brilliance. This is the *Bodenständigkeit* or earth-rootedness of language so cherished by Heidegger. (KIESEL 2014, p. 150).

The example of words used in our everyday discourse *versus* words used poetically is indeed clarifying in this connection. If words are being used merely to convey information (say), their *materiality*, e.g., the specificity of the *spoken sounds* or *written signs* used to produce them, should ideally “disappear into usefulness”. Language, in this case, is literally a *medium*, a means to an end, which will be more efficiently achieved the less the material conditions for its production become salient. Conversely, whenever the medium *does not* “disappear into usefulness” and those conditions *do* become salient – e.g., when we are just starting to learn a new language and struggling to understand the *meaning* of some words and sentences – we may default to *merely* hearing *sounds* or seeing *signs* that are, as yet, meaningless for us. *Poetical* uses of language lie on the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, as they remind even competent speakers, who are all-too-used to the equipmentality and “transparency” of words, that these tools can be repurposed, as long as we acknowledge that *constant struggle* between rootedness into the “earth” of our human capacities and circumstances and our endless potential to open up new worlds – which is a way of describing how *meaning*, as it occurs in our everyday conversations as well as in our art, our culture, our mythology, etc., is itself a *transformed expression* of our

(first?) nature¹⁶. By freeing words from their habitual uses, poetry thus reveals a deeper layer of the production of meaning, and it is in this sense, I take it, that the word as used by the poet “truly becomes a word and remains a word”.

Generalizing the point about language, perhaps one could say, in a Heideggerian spirit, that artworks remind us precisely that *meaning*, whatever the medium used to convey it, is always a matter of disclosing *and* concealing, simultaneously. Therefore, even technology – understood not as a mere *set of devices*, but as a *way of revealing*¹⁷ – must leave something concealed, hidden, if we are not to become completely and perhaps irreversibly immersed in an instrumental way of being-in-the-world (which is precisely the “danger” against which Heidegger is warning us in his later work). This hidden aspect that conditions the disclosure of meaning is what Heidegger calls “the mystery”, and the comportment he is prescribing (as a way of avoiding the danger of utter meaninglessness) is therefore called “openness to the mystery”:

The meaning pervading technology hides itself. But if we explicitly and continuously heed the fact that such hidden meaning touches us everywhere in the world of technology, we stand at once within the realm of that which hides itself from us, and hides itself just in approaching us. That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment that enables us to remain open to the meaning hidden in technology, openness to the mystery. (HEIDEGGER 1966, p. 55).

But how are we, immersed in this current, technological understanding of being as we are, to become open to such a radical change in attitude? And how exactly is art supposed to help us achieve this? The beginning of an answer to these questions is offered at the very end of the technology essay. In that context, after reminding us once again that “the essence of technology is nothing technological”, Heidegger claims that:

¹⁶ “[A]ll the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’”, as Cavell would say (1976, p. 52).

¹⁷ As Heidegger keeps reminding us, “the essence of technology is nothing technological” (1977, p. 35).

essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art. (HEIDEGGER 1977, p. 35).

Art, I would submit, is *akin* to the essence of technology precisely because both are (essentially) *ways of revealing being*. Yet they are also fundamentally *different* because their respective ways of revealing push us to opposite directions: technology tends to *close* us to “the mystery”, by making us used to relate to the world and even to ourselves as “standing-reserve”, i.e., as an endless store of endlessly flexible equipment that is completely “transparent” and available; art, on the other hand (again, when understood essentially, hence *not* as simply part of that “standing-reserve”) tends to *open* us to “the mystery”, i.e., to the inexhaustible potential of being to become meaningful, hence also to its inexhaustible concealment, its rootedness into the “earth”.

But what all of this has to do with film and filmic-based media specifically? From what we have been discussing, it seems a foregone conclusion for Heidegger that there cannot be such things as *filmic* or *cinematic* artworks, at least not in his most demanding sense of “artwork”¹⁸. As Shawn Loht reminds us:

[...] Heidegger himself understands the relationship between art, truth, and being as fundamentally beyond the purview of filmic and popular media. Heidegger understands being as fundamentally rooted in a degree of hiddenness or concealment, and to a far-enough degree that media such as film and photography do not ordinarily penetrate. The widespread proliferation of photographic pictures into every moment of life only obscures this fact further. (LOHT 2017, p. 30).

Heidegger’s own opinion notwithstanding, some of his commentators (including Loht¹⁹) have recently argued that we can deploy a Heideggerian framework for considering at least some specific films as instances of

¹⁸ And indeed, in what appears to be the only context in which Heidegger discusses a particular film – namely in “A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer,” where the two titular interlocutors discuss Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) – the conclusion seems to be precisely that. In this dialogue, the Japanese guest claims that the very fact that the Japanese world is “captured and imprisoned at all within the objectness of photography” makes *Rashomon* an instance of “Western techno-rationalisation” (see HEIDEGGER 1982, p. 16-17). See also Sinnerbrink (2014) and Moseley (2018) for a more detailed analysis of this use of *Rashomon* in Heidegger’s dialogue.

(what Heidegger himself defines as) artworks. Michael Josiah Moseley, for example, has argued that a more nuanced understanding of the medium of film (in particular of the so-called “automatism” of the film-photographic image) can make way for a more positive view of its capabilities as artworks, in Heidegger’s sense. According to Moseley, “Heidegger considers Being to be imperceptible on film because he understands the film-photographic image to be a transparent copy that cannot free the earth” (2018, p. 372); therefore:

An approach [...] to justifying a positive conception of Heideggerian cinema might seek [...] to discover occasions in cinema where, despite its usual transparency, the image might no longer refer to the entities it depicts and might come forth as thingly. That is, where the cinematic image might free the earth and present an image. (MOSELEY 2018, p. 373).²⁰

Similarly, Robert Sinnerbrink argued that cinema, being the technological art form *par excellence*, “participates in the very ambiguity of modern technology, its danger and its saving power”, and thus needs not to be reduced to “an instrument of representational objectification, or a means of reducing art to an aesthetic resource designed to elicit sensation”, but can also be understood as a technological medium capable of revealing “the truth of beings, even our own experience of world-disclosure” (SINNERBRINK 2014, p. 77):

In other words, we can think of cinema, adapting Heidegger, as a medium of *poiēsis*: a medium of the “poetic revealing” of beings, worlds, and different aspects of existence. By “cinematic *poiēsis*” I mean a revealing or bringing-forth of complex virtual worlds; the technologically mediated projection and disclosure of a world through audiovisual images. Cinematic *poiēsis* articulates film’s “truth-disclosing” power to present time, capture movement, express meaning, or reveal aspects of our experience of world that might otherwise remain obscured or marginalized. This “Heideggerian” conception of cinema can

¹⁹ The first four chapters of (LOHT 2017) grapple with the question of how we can reconcile film as an artistic medium with Heidegger’s own critiques, by highlighting aspects of the phenomenological character of the viewer experience that may enable (some) films to function as vehicles for philosophical thought. The remaining chapters provide an application of that theoretical framework to the films of three contemporary filmmakers: Terrence Malick, Michael Haneke, and David Gordon Green.

²⁰ Moseley himself argues that some of Antonioni’s films (e.g., *La notte* (1961) and *L’eclisse* (1962)) fit the bill, working as instances of films capable of “freeing the earth”.

supplement the more traditional representational and narrative focus on film as presenting objects instrumentally within the action-directed schemas of psychologically motivated subjects. (SINNERBRINK 2014, p. 77)²¹

Going back to the analogy with different uses of words and language may help us make sense of this notion of “cinematic *poiēsis*”. Recall that, according to the scheme I presented before, there are at least three ways of using or considering words: (i) *materially* (as meaningless sounds or written signs); (ii) *equipmentally* (as “transparent tools” used to convey habitual meaning, e.g., in a conversation between masters of a language); and finally (iii) *poetically* (a reflective use capable of reminding us of the struggle between the “earthly” and the “worldly” conditions for meaning). Now film, I take it, can also be considered along those lines. Take a simple, narrative analog film as an example²²: (i’) *materially*, we can think of (this kind of) film as a projection of a succession of negative photographs onto a screen; (ii’) *equipmentally*, we can think of it as an audiovisual narrative composed of “objects instrumentally within the action-directed schemas of psychologically motivated subjects”²³, which in turn is “transparently” conveyed to someone used to its specific cinematic conventions; finally, (iii’) *poetically*, a film would have to go beyond conveying “transparent” narrative information about a fictional world, becoming self-reflexive, reminding us of its own conditions of possibility (as a crafted artwork composed of a succession of photographic images of reality) as well as of our responsibility to take up those images and interpret them, letting them reveal not only new (fictional) worlds, but also new aspects of our own world (hence new ways of being-in-the-world). In other words, a “poetical” film will not only be simultaneously revelatory and concealing (as are all the expressions of our human capacity for meaning), but it will invite us to think about itself as aware of this status, hence to reflect about the very conditions for disclosing meaning.

²¹ Sinnerbrink also offers as a paradigmatic example of a director engaged in “cinematic *poiēsis*” Terrence Malick.

²² Of course this is just one simple instance of our complex, family-resemblance concept of “film”. But, as Wittgenstein once warned us, starting with *simple* cases and trying to achieve clarity about these is often the best strategy in order to deal with complex concepts (see, e.g., WITTGENSTEIN 1968, p. 17). Similar considerations can be offered for other cases, such as digital film, etc.

²³ To repeat Sinnerbrink’s useful shorthand — see 2014, p. 77.

This abstract characterization stands in need of specification, which in turn requires presenting detailed readings of specific films which could exemplify it. Due to limitations of space, however, all I can offer here is an indication of how such a reading would look like²⁴. I will do that by inviting us to go back to a passage of the expanded edition of Cavell's *The World Viewed*, where he tentatively describes the achievement of Terrence Malick's film *Days of Heaven* (1978):

I assume that anyone who has taken an interest in the film [*Days of Heaven*] wishes to understand what its extremities of beauty are in service of; and not just its extremities but its successions of beauty. Whatever its subject will be understood to be, no one could have undertaken to explore it without the confidence that his or her capacity for extracting beauty from nature and from the photographic projection or displacement of nature is inexhaustible, which is of course a confidence at the same time in nature's and in film's capacities to provide it. This ranging of confidence is itself exhilarating and must somehow be part of the subject of the film. Shall we try expressing the subject as one in which the works and the emotions and the entanglements of human beings are at every moment reduced to insignificance by the casual rounds of earth and sky? I think the film does indeed contain a metaphysical vision of the world; but I think one feels that one has never quite seen the scene of human existence—call it the arena between earth (or days) and heaven—quite realized this way on film before. (CAVELL 1979, p. xiv-xv).

Inspired by some passages from Heidegger's essay *What Is Called Thinking?*²⁵, Cavell elaborates on Malick's achievement of "extracting beauty from nature and from the photographic projection or displacement of nature" connecting it with the acknowledgement of "a fundamental fact of film's photographic basis", namely:

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. Then if in relation to objects capable of such self-manifestation human

²⁴ Elsewhere I offered more detailed readings of two films that can, in retrospect, be thought of as defenses of the *poetical* potential of film; see Techio 2018 and Techio 2020.

²⁵ HEIDEGGER 1972, p. 227-237.

beings are reduced in significance, or crushed by the fact of beauty left vacant, perhaps this is because in trying to take dominion over the world, or in aestheticizing it (temptations inherent in the making of film, or of any art), they are refusing their participation with it. (CAVELL 1979, p. xvi).

I take it that the acknowledgment of the “fundamental fact of film’s photographic basis” described above — having to do with the potential for photographed and projected objects to *recreate* themselves on screen, reminding us both of their physical origins and roles in *our world* and of their capability for transcending those origins and roles, say their original equipmentality — is one instance of a *poetical* function of film, as previously defined. That this function needs to be *discovered* by filmmakers confident in their capacities “for extracting beauty from nature and from the photographic projection or displacement of nature” further calls attention to the fact that this is not simply a matter of film’s habitual, *equipmental* function of conveying audiovisual narrative information about a fictional world. Actually, as Cavell intimates in the last sentence of the passage just quoted, the *refusal* to participate in this cinematic recreation and in the resulting “self-manifestation” of objects (or say of being, in Heidegger’s sense²⁶) may be *more natural* to us, given our current focus in “taking dominion over the world”, which also explains the *inherent* tendency “in the making of film, or of any art” to *aestheticize* our relation to objects²⁷. What this shows is that a great effort needs to be made by a filmmaker, or by any artist, in order to counteract these ingrained tendencies.

²⁶ E.g. in the following passage, quoted by Cavell: “The presence we described [namely of the “Being of beings”] gathers itself in the continuance which causes a mountain, a sea, a house to endure and, by that duration, to lie before us among other things that are present [...]. The Greeks experience such duration as a luminous appearance in the sense of illumined, radiant self-manifestation.” (Heidegger, 1972, p. 237)

²⁷ I take it that Cavell is here alluding to a Heideggerian point about “aestheticization”, a phenomenon which Heidegger himself sees as “essential [...] of our modern period”, and which consists in reducing an artwork to an “object of mere subjective experience” (1977, p. 116). In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger distinguishes (i) knowledge of an artwork “in the manner of preserving” it from (ii) the “merely aestheticizing connoisseurship of the work’s formal aspects, its qualities and charms” (2001, p. 65-6); the first kind of knowledge, he says, “does not deprive the work of its independence, does not drag it into the sphere of mere experience, and does not degrade it to the role of a stimulator of experience” (all of which would be marks of an “aestheticizing” relation such as [ii]); in the same vein, “[p]reserving the work does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work” (p. 66).

At the end of his essay on technology, Heidegger warns us that even if we are able to *see through* technology — understanding that it is, in essence, *a way of revealing*, and thus becoming open to *other* ways of revealing, safekeeping the “unconcealed” and “the mystery” — even after all this “we are not yet saved” but rather “summoned to hope in the growing light of the saving power” (1977, p. 33). How, then, can this “salvation” finally happen? Heidegger’s answer is rather mysterious itself: “Here and now and in little things, that we may foster the saving power in its increase” (ibid.). Inspired in part by Heidegger, Albert Borgmann, in his book *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, traces the development from a pre-modern understanding of the world to our current, “hypermodern” condition, which includes, amongst its features, the idea of “hyperreality” with which I started this paper²⁸. As an alternative to the “sullen resignation to the decline of the modern era” which, according to Borgmann, ends up leading to hypermodernism (see 1993, p. 6), he too proposes the “recovery of the world of eloquent things” (ibid.)²⁹. Much more would have to be said in order to clarify these suggestions, but I would like to conclude this paper by submitting that the effect of Malick’s *Days of Heaven*, as read by Cavell, seems to be precisely that of reminding us of the power of “little” and “eloquent things”, by putting “the works and the emotions and the entanglements of human beings” in perspective relative to “the casual rounds of earth and sky” (CAVELL 1979, p. xiv). And if that is true, then the possibility is open to further investigate ways in which film, this essentially technological art, can help us go beyond our technological understanding of being, opening (or reopening) ways of connecting with reality that embody a freer, more reflexive and self-conscious attitude towards it.

²⁸ “[...] hypermodernism [...] is devoted to the design of a technologically sophisticated and glamorously unreal universe distinguished by its hyperreality, hyperactivity, and hyperintelligence” (BORGMANN 1993, p. 6).

²⁹ Borgmann calls the position that would allow for such a recovery “postmodern realism”, and argues that its main “emergent characteristics” are “focal realism, patient vigor, and communal celebration” (1993, p. 6.). Those characteristics will be explored in chapter 5 of his book.

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