Experience Missed or Lost?: Cavell's Concept of the Ordinary and Walter Benjamin on the "Loss of Aura"

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> I sometimes speak of [...] discovering the extraordinary in what we call ordinary and discovering the ordinary in what we call extraordinary; sometimes as detecting significance in the insignificant, sometimes as detecting insignificance in the significant.
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> CAVELL, "Companionable Thinking"

> [...] we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.
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> WALTER BENJAMIN, "Surrealism"

The notion of the ordinary or everyday is of seminal importance in Cavell's readings of literature.[1] The transcendental and anthropological dimensions of skepticism and the ordinary, however, may sometimes appear to be treated by him in an essentially ahistorical manner. But the discovery of the ordinary, which is always a re-discovery, can also be shown to be deeply embedded in Cavell's treatment of modernism in the arts. The present essay therefore proposes that we can deepen our understanding of the ordinary by relating it to Walter Benjamin's ideas about the "loss of aura," which he develops with regard to Baudelaire, Proust and film, most famously in his essays

1. The notion of the ordinary is particularly important in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988); see also Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-162.

about "The Artwork in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility" and on "Some Motifs in Baudelaire." Cavell's and Benjamin's common aesthetic interests can of course be regarded as the expression of very different concerns: Whereas Cavell is then considered to be primarily interested in epistemological issues, Benjamin will be seen as defending, sometimes radically, a historical-materialist view of art. In spite of these differences in outlook, however, Cavell and Benjamin attempt to address a very similar question, namely how to conceive of significance as neither having its source in transcendence nor as being reducible to a mere given in the positivistic sense. In this sense, both the notion of the ordinary and the concept of the "loss of aura" are responsive to the particular historical conditions of modernity.

There is an ambiguity in the notion of "aura" that aligns it with and simultaneously distinguishes it from the ordinary: The interplay of closeness and distance in Benjamin's definition of "aura" as "the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be"[2] approximates Wittgenstein's characterization of the ordinary in the following terms: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it's always before one's eyes.)"[3] That a dialectic of nearness and distance is at work not only in each of these two concepts taken by themselves but also in the relationship between Benjamin and Wittgenstein more generally is what Cavell draws attention to when he says: "[…] Benjamin's anti- or counterphilosophy may be seen specifically as immeasurably distant from and close to Wittgenstein's anti- or counter-philosophy in *Philosophical Investigations* […]."[4] In "The Artwork in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," however, Benjamin seems to conceive of auratic experience as definitively a thing of the past, which is not the case for the ordinary in Wittgenstein's and Cavell's sense. Still, it is a significant aspect of the ordinary that it is never simply present as such, but is constantly missed. It is precisely its unobtrusiveness, its elusive character that constitutes the ordinary as a place where we have always already been without having yet or ever really arrived there.[5] Thus, a notion of

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2. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 518.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43e, § 129.
4. Cavell, "Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities," in *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999), 236.
5. Cavell calls the ordinary "a place we have never been"; Cavell, "Something Out of the Ordinary," in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 9-10.

experience as something that is either essentially bound to be missed or is not possible at all any more in the modern age unites Cavell's and Benjamin's accounts of the nature and importance of art. The comparison between their attitudes toward the status of experience is therefore an approach to the concept of the ordinary that shows it to be crucial to an understanding of the relation between art and the modern world.

Cavell's Transcendental Criticism and the Idea of the Ordinary

The notion of the "ordinary" as included in the term "ordinary language philosophy" was originally used to contrast with concepts such as "logic," "philosophy" or "metaphysics." Repeatedly, Cavell quotes and comments on Wittgenstein's description of his philosophical procedures in the *Philosophical Investigations* that says: "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."[6] Cavell thus remained faithful not only to the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, but to the term as well, giving the idea of the "ordinary" or the "everyday" more weight than Austin or even Wittgenstein did. His discovery of what he calls the "underwriting of ordinary language philosophy" by the American transcendentalists,[7] especially Emerson's emphasis on "the common, [...] the familiar, the low,"[8] was certainly of great importance in this respect. In consequence, further aspects of the idea of the ordinary become increasingly more significant. One of these aspects is its inconspicuousness, the unobtrusive closeness that Wittgenstein highlights in saying: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity."[9] In various ways, the things that easily go unnoticed for being so close have played an important role in Cavell's thought from the beginning. Consider, for example, the idea that the data which provide the foundation of his interpretation of *King Lear* are all obvious, and his attempt to account for the fact that these aspects of the

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd edn. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 41e, § 116.

7. Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation. (Politics as opposed to what?)," in *Themes out of School. Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 51.

8. "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low"; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (London: Penguin, 2003), 102.

9. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43e, § 129.

play could have been missed by all readers but himself.[10] Or think of the issue of "presentness" that comes up both in the *Lear* essay and in *The World Viewed*.[11] In these passages, it sometimes seems as though we let ourselves continuously be distracted. Yet, in other moments, this condition appears less as a self-inflicted state than as an aspect of the ordinary itself in its elusiveness. This ambiguity is obvious in the first pages of Cavell's autobiography, *Little did I know*, in a short passage in which he draws, in a rather offhand way, a picture of the human condition:

> [...] whatever happens – whatever is eventful enough for speech – is from the beginning accidental, as if human life *is inherently interrupted*, things chronically occurring at unripe times, in the wrong tempo, comically or poignantly. [...] What that now means to me is that *we chronically interrupt ourselves* – say, we fail to give the right quality or quantity of time to our thoughts or deeds, say, let them climax. [...] But chronic interruption means the perpetual incompleteness of human expression [...].[12]

In these sentences, human existence appears as a life-form that is not naturally synchronized with its experience. We can understand Cavell's autobiography, of course, as an attempt to give voice to a part of his own life that has remained expressionless in this way. In "Something out of the Ordinary," Cavell makes explicit that an essential constituent of the ordinary is that it always slips out of our grasp: "the ordinary as what is missable."[13] Shortly after, Cavell establishes a connection between what he calls the "fact or fantasy of an experience missed" and the concept of criticism:

> I have rather assumed, more or less without argument [...], that Kant's location of the aesthetic judgment, as claiming to record the presence of pleasure without a concept, makes room for a particular form of criticism, one capable

10. Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love. A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 272; cf. ibid., 310: "It is the difficulty of seeing the obvious, something which for some reason is always underestimated."

11. Ibid., 322; Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridg.e, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 108-126.

12. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 30; emphasis added.

13. Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary," 11.

> of supplying the concepts which, after the fact of pleasure, articulate the grounds of this experience in particular objects. The work of such criticism is to reveal its object as having yet to achieve its due effect. Something there, despite being fully opened to the senses, has been missed.[14]

In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," Cavell has already drawn on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in his attempt to characterize the ambiguous nature of the ordinary language philosopher's claim to determine "what we should say when," which is neither a merely empirical nor a purely transcendental judgment.[15] Now, while referring to his earlier essay, Cavell tries to articulate the presuppositions of his practice of literary criticism (and art criticism in general) by transforming and enlarging once more Kant's understanding of aesthetic judgment. Kant does not attribute any conceptual content to the aesthetic judgment but distinguishes clearly between the aesthetic and the cognitive mode of judgment.[16] In contrast to that, Cavell thinks that criticism is able to provide the concepts for an understanding of an aesthetic experience retrospectively. Consequently, the task of the critic is not to subsume an object under certain concepts, but to explain how and why at the time of the experience we lacked the necessary conceptual outfit to fully grasp what we perceived, i.e., why we *had* to miss something that was still somehow there. Works of art allow us to have this experience of an experience missed in an exemplary way. That an experience can be revealed in this belated fashion—in an *essentially* retrospective way—as richer than we were able to realize while it was present, shows us that there is an aesthetic surplus in our experience, which makes our experiences in hindsight more comprehensive than our possibilities of simultaneous perception. This excess of meaning can eventually guarantee the existence of something independent from my consciousness and my conceptual patterns of recognition. Thus, aesthetic experience paradoxically becomes a touchstone of the real, or of the existence of the world. Criticism, then, determines the features of its objects not by recognition,

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14. Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary," 11.

15. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 86-96.

16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), 45-46 (§ 6).

but by letting the object in question itself teach us the mode of its experience. Cavell stresses this responsiveness to the artwork's own modeling of its conditions of reception as a decisive aspect of his approach to literature.[17] In its responsiveness to the work of art, criticism turns into a criticism of the object and our experience of the object at the same time. Thus, it allows us to leave behind our "constructions" or "schematizations" of experience, whether of the empiricist ("All experience is based on sense data") or of the rationalistic type ("All experience is based on *a priori* forms of knowledge"). In doing so, art teaches us about what Cavell, in a paradoxical twist of Kantian terms, calls "the autonomy of the object."[18] In attributing "self-government" to reason alone, Kant rendered it almost impossible to think of ourselves as truly receptive to something outside of ourselves. The ensuing post-Kantian skepticism is perceived as a problem and reacted against in the texts of Wordsworth, Coleridge and the transcendentalists that Cavell dedicates himself to in *In Quest of the Ordinary*.[19] A criticism that tries to show in each case that its object does not *presuppose* the conditions of its being experienced but *creates* them, deserves to be called "transcendental criticism." What is at stake in this kind of criticism is made explicit by Cavell when he speaks of the

> [...] connection between the arrogation of the right to speak for others about the language we share *and* about works of art we cannot bear not to share. [...] It is a condition of, or threat to, that relation to things called aesthetic, that something I know and cannot make intelligible stands to be lost to me.[20]

When I am not able to share the experience of an artwork, I eventually cannot even be sure of what I experienced myself and I am therefore liable to have to give up on what I took to be a significant part of reality. That our experience of art is threatened if we are unable to share it with someone may at first glance seem to invite the comparison with the skeptic's picture of privacy as an essential incapacity to communica-

17. David Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 7.
18. Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 116.
19. Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant. (Terms as Conditions)," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 29ff.
20. Cavell, "Something Out of the Ordinary," 9.

te or share our experience. But the experience of art, far from being necessarily private, rather calls for the creation of a community in which the experience *could* be shared and it must be understood as itself an attempt at extending the boundaries of our common, shared world.

From Involuntary Memory to the Loss of Aura

The theme of a missed experience and its recovery is probably nowhere more prominent than in Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* that Cavell repeatedly refers to in his autobiography.[21] In the novel's most famous passage the protagonist tastes a *madeleine*, a small cake dipped in lime blossom tea, that suddenly makes him re-experience parts of his childhood that had formerly been out of reach of his conscious memory.[22] In early childhood, as he now remembers, he used to eat such a piece of cake when he went to visit his aunt Leonie. After the first forty pages of the novel that contain the narrator's dim conscious childhood memories, the aesthetic experience of the cake opens up a completely new dimension of memory and triggers a rush of childhood images that fills the bulk of the novel's first volume. It is important to notice that this special dimension of memory, called involuntary memory, does not revive experiences the way we consciously lived through them in the past, it rather opens up a completely new dimension of our experience that we missed at the time when the events remembered originally took place. Walter Benjamin emphasizes this aspect of involuntary memory in saying:

> [...] only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], can become a component of *mémoire involontaire*.[23]

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21. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 28, 31, 386, 533. For a more elaborate account of the connection between Proust and Cavell see Bernhard Stricker, "'L'intérêt de la lecture'—lesen und gelesen werden. (Proust, Thoreau, de Man, Cavell)," in *Proust-Lektüren*, ed. Peter Brandes (Hamburg: Dr. Kovač, 2014), 17-66.

22. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 4 vols., ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-1989), vol. 1, 43-47.

23. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), vol. 4, 1938-1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 317.

We can regard *In Search of Lost Time* as a study of the ordinary: The narrator unfolds before us in minute detail the train of everyday events and their recurrences over the span of nearly a lifetime. One of the novel's first reviewers complained about the discrepancy between the trivial nature of the recorded action and the amount of time spent in telling it.[24] But the importance of the ordinary is also registered in the novel's abundant use of what Gérard Genette has called the "iterative mode" of story-telling, i.e., the mode that is used to narrate events that occur repeatedly or on a regular basis, in sentences such as "Every sunday, we went to church."[25] For Walter Benjamin, the self-estrangement that lies at the foundation of our involuntary memory is due to the de-subjectifying aspects of modern everyday life. As a result, it is a question of chance whether we will be able to take possession of our experience and achieve self-knowledge:

> According to Proust, it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience. But there is nothing inevitable about the dependence on chance in this matter. A person's concerns are not by nature of an *inescapably private character*. They attain this character only after the likelihood decreases that one's external concerns will be assimilated to one's experience.[26]

That our experience becomes incommunicable since it can no longer be assimilated and integrated into the fabric of our lives or rendered in a story-telling mode is particularly emphasized in Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller."[27] But his remark has to be understood in the context of his ideas on the loss of the "auratic" structure of experience which he elaborates in a number writings from the 1930s. According to his concept of "aura," in a modern society determined by capitalist industrialism, urbanism and mass media there is no room for the individual to have any authentic, significant

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24. See the "rapport de lecture" by Jacques Madeleine (pseudonym of the poet Jacques Normand) in Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann. À la recherche du temps perdu I*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 446-450.

25. Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit. Essai de méthode* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), 111-127.

26. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 315; emphasis added.

27. Benjamin, "The Storyteller. Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 143-166.

experience. Three aspects of modern society prove to be particularly resistant to the assimilation of experience: (1) the isolation of informative content in the newspapers, the only virtue of which consists in its novelty; (2) the dull and repetitive character of work in the factories that consists in a constant repetition of the same routines; and (3) the acceleration of urban traffic and the resulting changes in the structure of perception, such as a perpetually heightened consciousness that is necessary in order to react to the impulses from the streets.[28] As a result, it is impossible for individuals to incorporate their experiences and they are at the mercy of a discontinuous chain of "inescapably private" sensations.

Cavell and Benjamin on Baudelaire and Film

There is an easily recognizable parallel between the incommunicability that Benjamin finds so disturbing about the "sensational" character of modern life and Cavell's worry over the individual's isolation that is a result of skepticism. This parallel appears all the more striking in face of the fact that Cavell is primarily concerned with epistemological issues whereas Benjamin's is essentially a historical-materialist perspective.[29] Consequently, Cavell sees skepticism as a recurring condition that defines the modern era since Descartes, while Benjamin regards the loss of authentic experience mainly as a result of socio-economic developments that occur during the 19th century.[30] These distinguishing features render the affinities between the two thinkers in their respective

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28. All these factors play an important part in Benjamin's "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" as well as in the famous "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 101-133. There are three, slightly differing versions of Benjamin's famous article of which we generally quote the second version, which the author himself intended to have published. On the loss of aura see also: Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin. A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 147-152. I follow Friedlander in applying the term "aura" not only to the experience of artworks, but to the structure of significant experience in general (262, n. 5); cf. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), 4.

29. The importance of this difference in outlook must not be underrated but will not be our primary concern in this paper.

30. Giorgio Agamben, in enlarging Benjamin's argument in *Infancy and History*, has shown the problem of the loss of aura to be related to modern science from its very beginning in the 16th century: Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History. The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 11-63. Eva Geulen has very convincingly argued that Benjamin's identification of aura is a performative gesture which depends on the prior loss of the auratic structure of experience: "[…] the aura, ephemeral and altogether immaterial, is less a concept than a performative intervention. The theory of aura developed in sections 2 through 4 undoubtedly unfolds under the

treatment of Baudelaire, film and modern art even more important. Both Cavell and Benjamin think that the cinema can still take the audience's interest for granted at a moment in history when all the other arts are marked by a gap between pleasure and what Benjamin calls the "attitude of expert appraisal."[31] Benjamin explains this by referring to changes in the structure of perception: the speed of a sequence of moving pictures corresponds to the structure of perception of a citizen who is used to react to the shocks and impulses from urban traffic. The sensational effect of these impressions is due only to their novelty and is lost at the exact moment they reach the level of consciousness. Therefore, they leave no traces in memory.

> *Film is the art form corresponding to the pronounced threat to life in which people live today*. It corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception—changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in big-city traffic, and on the scale of world history by each fighter against the present social order.[32]

The same habits that make us turn to movies render the reading of poetry a much harder task than it used to be in former ages, since poetry usually relies on the reader's ability to concentrate. Baudelaire, however, as Benjamin tells us, was the first poet to take into account the difficulties that a modern reader of poetry has to face:

> Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. [...] Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points. What they prefer is sensual pleasure; they are familiar with the "spleen" which kills interest and receptiveness.[33]

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rubric of the last sentence of section I. Nothing is more revealing for the analysis of modern technologies of reproduction, Benjamin writes, 'than the way in which the two manifestations – reproduction of the artwork and cinematic art – retroactively effect art in its received form' [...]. More exactly: aura can only be described retrospectively, for the knowledge that the essence of art has up until now been constituted in the aura can only appear once it has lost this character. Thus aura as aura arises only in its loss"; Eva Geulen, *The End of Art. Readings in a Rumor after Hegel*, transl. James McFarland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 84.

31. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 116.

32. Ibid., 132, n. 33.

33. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 313.

Cavell sees a very similar connection between Baudelaire's depiction of modern urban life and the invention of film. In *The World Viewed* he draws on Baudelaire's famous text *The Painter of Modern Life* for his explanations on the origin of cinema. Astonishingly, he claims that Baudelaire anticipated the cinema in what Cavell calls a "prophetic hallucination."[34] The occasion for this unlikely assertion is another instance of a missed experience: How is it possible, Cavell wonders, that Baudelaire took only a very casual interest in what we would regard as the most important painters of his day, Courbet and Manet? Yet, at the same time, he dedicated his manifesto of modernism, *The Painter of Modern Life*, to the comparably insignificant painter Constantin Guys? According to Cavell, Baudelaire saw in Guys's drawings something more (than what they are), i.e., a hint at the possible fulfillment of his anticipatory wish for motion pictures:

> Out of his despair of happiness, out of his disgust with its official made-up substitutes, and out of his knowledge of his isolation and estrangement from the present and the foreignness of the past [...], he found the wish for photography, in particular for motion pictures—the wish for that specific simultaneity of presence and absence which only the cinema will satisfy.[35]

Cavell's and Benjamin's diagnoses could not possibly be more fully in accord. According to them, Baudelaire perceived the sensations that life in the urban surroundings of his time provided as faked, as having lost the character of truly significant experience. In his poetry, he tried, therefore, to expose the illusory character of life in a world of things that are devoid of any intrinsic history or value since they have taken on the commodity form. Benjamin shows that allegory is the crucial rhetorical device that Baudelaire employs to this purpose.[36] Cavell is more interested, however, in the connection between Baudelaire's perception of his urban environment and the possibilities of the medium of film:

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34. For the following see: Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 41-46; for Baudelaire's text see Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-1976), vol. 2, 683-724.

35. Ibid., 42. That Baudelaire did not appreciate the new technology of photography is taken into account by Cavell; ibid., 42: "Photographs did not look like photographs to him; they looked like *imitation paintings* [...]."

36. Ibid., 43-44.

> Read as an anticipation of film, Baudelaire's little book seems to me, in dozens of its terms, insights and turns of phrase, to take on the power it must have had for him. [...] When Baudelaire speaks of "the pleasure that the artistic eye obtains ... from the series of geometrical figures that the object in question ... successively and rapidly creates in space," he is not describing anything a draftsman showed him; he is having a prophetic hallucination.[37]

Cavell finds a connection between Baudelaire's appreciation of Guys's drawings and film in the former's description of the way in which movement is captured by the draughtsman's pencil. Whereas drawings can record movement only in an approximate fashion, motion pictures made it a natural constituent of their own medium. Thus, they are much better suited to the task of capturing the ephemeral, fleeting appearances of everyday life in the city. Capturing these fugitive moments constitutes an essential part of the modern manifestation of beauty for Baudelaire. What fascinates him in fashion and cosmetics is as much their changing appearance as it is the artificiality of the human life-form itself, i.e., that the human mode of existence *must* manifest itself, not necessarily in this or that particular type of fashion, but in some contingent way of dressing, moving, behaving, etc.

> In praising Cosmetics, he refers not merely to make-up, but also to fashion generally and beyond that to the artifices necessary to civilized life as a whole: its streets, parks, buildings, furnishings, commodities—the secretions and scaffoldings of our forms of life.[38]

These ordinary circumstances of human life that are unobtrusive but typical in their particular appearance for a certain historical time and age are what Baudelaire is interested in when he praises Guys. In the guise of the draughtsman, Baudelaire pays his homage to the ordinary.

In comparing the cinema to Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Benjamin equally observes film's particular capacity for the visualization of the ordinary:

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37. For the passage Cavell quotes see Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, 724.
38. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 44.

> Since the publication of *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life), things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had previously floated unnoticed on the broad stream of perception. A similar deepening of apperception throughout the entire spectrum of optical—and now also auditory—impressions has been accomplished by film. [...] Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.[39]

Thus, Cavell and Benjamin essentially agree on the way in which film allows the ordinary to become visible. If Cavell regards Baudelaire as anticipating the cinema, Benjamin sees a quite similar prefiguration of cinema in the aesthetic shock principle of the Dadaists.[40] Benjamin, however, emphasizes the fact that the discontinuous stream of images makes film the natural prolongation of the modern citizen's habits of perception, whereas Cavell is more interested in the relation of the movies to the world they project and to their cinematic audience. He attributes a "magic character" to the peculiar mode in which the cinema reproduces the world. This magical character is due to the automatism of film, the way in which the appearance of the world is wholly accounted for by the technical mechanism of the cinematic projection, because it renders the viewers' acknowledgment of the world's appearance superfluous. The viewers can indulge in their invisibility in a way that makes their anonymous and private condition appear completely natural.

> How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. This is not a wish for power over creation (as Pygmalion's was), but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens. [...] In viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an ex-

39. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 265. Eli Friedlander highlights the connection of the ordinary and film in Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 171-180.

40. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 118-119.

> pression of modern privacy or anonymity. It is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed as at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition.[41]

In making anonymity and privacy a condition for the viewing of films, the auditorium in a cinema provides a habitat of modern citizens and relieves them temporarily of the burden of responsibility for their own isolation. In this respect, Cavell stresses the way in which viewing a film differs from our lives outside the cinema, whereas Benjamin sees a continuity between our everyday modes of perception and the discontinuous stream of images that we watch on screen.

Media and Modernism

But isn't Cavell's idea of Baudelaire having anticipated the cinema completely incongruous, if we consider the fact that the technical preconditions for the possible realization of film were not even given at the time of Baudelaire's writing? Cavell's assertion that Baudelaire's wish was able to anticipate the possibilities of film may seem to idealize and overly simplify the complex history of technological progress. His intention, however, is to counterbalance the opposite oversimplification that identifies the origin of the cinema with the availability of the technical prerequisites for its realization. Cavell emphasizes that we must understand the cinema as corresponding to and satisfying a human wish or desire.[42] Thus, the invention of film

41. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 40-41.

42. Ibid., 38ff. For this fundamental idea and many more besides Cavell is indebted to André Bazin to whom he refers numerous times in *The World Viewed*: "The way things happened seems to call for a reversal of the historical order of causality, which goes from the economic infrastructure to the ideological superstructure, and for us to consider the basic technical discoveries as fortunate accidents but essentially second in importance to the preconceived ideas of the inventors. The cinema is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven, and what strikes us most of all is the obstinate resistance of matter to ideas rather than of any help offered by techniques to the imagination of the researchers"; André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in André Bazin, *What is cinema?*, select. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1967), 17.

is essentially more than just a matter of technological progress. Rather, a possibility provided by a technological innovation can be grasped *as* a possibility only by the specific application that is given to its technical or material basis. This idea is fundamental in Cavell's history of the cinema (or of the modern arts in general) and it finds expression in his deliberately ambiguous use of the term "medium" to denote both the material basis of an art and the forms or genres realized by the paradigmatic instances of that art.[43] An artistic medium is the realization of a particular possibility of its physical elements that can be understood as such a possibility only in retrospect. Yet, it has to be regarded as having already been present, slumbering so to say, in the material basis. Therefore, an artistic medium is never simply deducible from its material components.

In Cavell's reflections on media, we can detect more than a slight resemblance to his conception of criticism, and this is hardly surprising, since the idea of art as internalizing its own criticism is part of the romantic legacy inherited by Cavell.[44] In its material basis a medium renders discernible a possibility that one can grasp as such only in hindsight but that has to be understood as having been present already before its discovery. In a similar manner, criticism discovers a significant aspect of an experience that remained hidden in the presence of the event but has to be regarded as already there when it is discerned in retrospect. We can thus understand Cavell's transcendental criticism as the complement to an art the development of which consists essentially in the invention of new media or "automatisms."[45] This is the case with modern art that cannot simply rely on its tradition as something given, but has to reestablish the connection with its past and its present in order to compel us to acknowledge its continued existence.[46]

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43. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 105.

44. This is meant by the famous notion of "Transzendentalpoesie" (transcendental poetry) coined by the German romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel and referred to by Cavell on several occasions, for example in Cavell, "Macbeth Appalled," in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edn., (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 232 and Cavell, "The *Investigations*' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 30ff.

45. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 104.

46. That artworks are no longer perceived as naturally embedded in a tradition is one of the crucial aspects of the loss of aura: "The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," 256. On the importance of tradition for the notion of aura cf. Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 148; Geulen, *The End of Art*, 88.

> Modernism signifies not that the powers of the arts are exhausted, but on the contrary that it has become the immediate task of the artist to achieve in his art the muse of the art itself—to declare, from itself, the art as a whole for which it speaks, to become a present of that art. One might say that the task is no longer to produce another instance of an art but a new medium within it. [...] It follows that in such a predicament, media are not given *a priori*.[47]

Whereas the cinema is naturally related to its tradition without having to establish this connection in an effort to keep the art of film itself alive,[48] modernism compels the other arts to a logic that is sometimes characterized as a perpetual strive for originality so as to surpass all earlier attempts.[49] However, originality is not to be confounded with novelty: In order to achieve true originality, the creation of a new medium has to be an expression of faithfulness to an artistic tradition that can be continued in no other way than by a break with the predefined conventions. Cavell calls this

> [...] the modernist predicament in which an art has lost its natural relation to its history, in which an artist, exactly because he is devoted to making an object that will bear the same weight of experience that such objects have always borne which constitute the history of his art, is compelled to find unheard-of structures that define themselves and their history against one another. [...] 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.[50]

In creating a new medium within an art, the artist acknowledges his indebtedness to the tradition that influenced him. In challenging the preexistent conventions of his art, the artist is thus not trying to forgo conventionality as such, but acknowledging and reaffirming its true depth.

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47. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 103.
48. With regard their respective historical situation, it makes much more sense to speak of a cinematic "tradition" in Cavell's case, of course, than in Benjamin's.
49. See, for instance Peter Gay on the "lure of heresy" in *Modernism. The Lure of Heresy. From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: Vintage, 2009), 3ff.
50. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 72.

In the light of this "modern predicament" of the arts, film's ability to capture the ordinary can be seen as a different way of expressing its natural relation to tradition. If the movies can present the ordinary on screen, they can do so because of the audience's particular presence-in-absence. If the ordinary can normally only be experienced as absent in our presence, then film allows the ordinary to appear because the automatism causes us to be absent from whatever is happening in the projected world. For the other arts, the necessity to affirm their existence by the production of new media goes along with the retrospective character of their experience that is typical of the ordinary also. Modernism according to Cavell's notion of it is characterized, then, by an asynchrony in the experience of the present. Modernism defines itself as modern not because of its being in the present, but because of a particular relation to time in which presence, i.e., being related to one's time and to the past, has become a task, something to be achieved, instead of a natural part of our condition. [51]

Experience, Language and the Arts

A further inflection that Cavell gives to the idea of the modern as characterized by the task of acknowledging our relatedness to the present, i.e., our existence, is expressed in his saying: "Art now exists in the condition of philosophy."[52] The condition of philosophy is epitomized by Descartes for whom the world and myself are no longer simply there, to be taken for granted. Cavell reads Descartes not as trying to prove his own existence once and for all, but as affirming that existence has to be accepted by thinking it through, by going back over it again, acknowledging it.[53] Benjamin also characterizes the reaction of the arts to the modern loss of aura by a reference to Descartes and modern science, when he says:

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51. Michel Foucault finds this attitude characteristically expressed in Baudelaire's *Le peintre de la vie moderne* in "What is Enlightenment?," trans. C. Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, eds. Paul Rabinow et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 38.

52. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 14.

53. Cavell, "Hamlet's Burden of Proof," in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 187: "In philosophy I take it to have been expressed in Descartes's *Cogito* argument, a point perfectly understood and deeply elaborated by Emerson, that to exist the human being has the burden of proving that he or she exists, and that this burden is discharged in *thinking* your existence, which comes in Descartes (though this is controversial) to finding how to say 'I am, I exist'; not of course to say it just once, but at every instant of your existence, originate it."

> For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start [...]. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa. They need a drawing table; they were constructors. Such a constructor was Descartes, who required nothing more to launch his entire philosophy than the single certitude "I think, therefore I am." And he went on from there. [...] And this same insistence on starting from the very beginning also marks artists when they followed the example of mathematicians and built the world from stereometric forms, like the Cubists, or modelled themselves on engineers, like Klee.[54]

Benjamin distinguishes the originality of the arts from the mere novelty of sensations and the industrial products of capitalist mass production by an analogy with scientific innovation. Cavell employs the same analogy when he compares the invention of an artistic medium to Thomas Kuhn's idea of a paradigm shift, thus emphasizing that a break with a tradition or convention can result from conservative motives.[55] Benjamin and Cavell are united in their protest against the sort of pre-determined conceptualization of experience that is most clearly exemplified by logic and mathematics taken as rigid frameworks and as measures of all possible experience. The experience of the ordinary as something essentially past, unremarkable in the present, becomes the foundation for Cavell's critical remonstrance against scientism and a view of experience that exclusively allows what is present and conceptually determinable to enter into consideration. In *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow,* he repeatedly refers to Quine's conceptualization of experience as a "check-point" of the validity of scientific theories:

> What is at stake is, even before the idea of knowledge, the sense of how human experience is to be called to account. The classical empiricist's idea of impressions as the origin, or cause, of ideas, like Quine's "check-points of experience" in the service of theory-building, stylizes experience.[56]

Whereas Cavell developed his ordinary language philosophy primarily against the background of positivist traditions in philosophy, Benjamin in an early essay on "The

54. Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 733.
55. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 238 (footnote no. 38).
56. Cavell, "Introduction," in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 2.

Program of the Coming Philosophy" takes a critical stance towards Neo-Kantianism that shows significant parallels to ordinary language concerns. The idea adopted from Hamann that Kant's scientific orientation prevented him from seeing the decisive role of language in the structuring of experience is the central point in his essay:

> Just as Kantian theory itself, in order to find its principles, needed to be confronted with a science with reference to which it could define them, modern philosophy will need this as well. The great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the concept of experience, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained only by relating knowledge to language [...]. For Kant, the consciousness that philosophical knowledge was absolutely certain and a priori, the consciousness of that aspect of philosophy in which it is fully the peer of mathematics, ensured that he devoted almost no attention to the fact that all philosophical knowledge has its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers. A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize.[57]

Benjamin's idea of redefining the nature of experience by showing the ways in which it is informed by language is more than an anticipation of ordinary language philosophy, of course. The idea is indebted to a tradition that Cavell has most usefully explored in the American transcendentalists. In commenting on Emerson, Cavell makes explicit the idea that not only the twelve categories of the understanding, but language as a whole is in need of a transcendental deduction:

> It is as if in Emerson's writing [...] Kant's pride in what he called his Copernican Revolution for philosophy, understanding the behavior of the world by understanding the behavior of our concepts of the world, is to be radicalized, so that not just twelve categories of the understanding are to be deduced, but every word in the language [...].[58]

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57. Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 107-108.

58. Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant," 38.

The insight that such a deduction of language cannot be achieved once and for all is fully worked out in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Cavell's writing is informed by it from the start. Therefore, Cavell's conception of the ordinary sketches our modern situation as being in a recurrent need to return to the ordinary from our flights into metaphysical emptiness or self-delusion. The ordinary is something we may perpetually miss, but Cavell does not wonder whether it could ever become completely lost to us. In this respect, we can regard Cavell's notion of the ordinary as a "diurnalization," so to say, of what Benjamin works out primarily as a historical diagnosis and conceives of as an epochal condition with regard to the technological means of mechanical reproducibility and industrial mass production.

Cavell's stance on skepticism and Benjamin's attitude towards the technologies of mechanical reproduction resemble each other in the way in which both tend to be ambivalent about whether to indulge in a nostalgic regret about the loss of aura and to mourn the presence of the world or to embrace the modern condition as inevitable and as containing the essential promise of change. What is emblematized for Cavell by Thoreau's pun in the last sentence of *Walden*, "The sun is but a morning star," which takes "morning" as related to, since acoustically indistinguishable from, "mourning,"[59] has been regarded by many readers as a crucial ambiguity in Benjamin's attitude towards the social and technological developments that lead to the loss of auratic experience.[60] There is, at any rate, a decisive tension between several of Benjamin's essays on the loss of aura: Sometimes the destruction of aura by the means of technical reproducibility is considered to be a definitive and irreversible situation, whereas in different contexts, most notably in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," art is regarded as still capable of resuscitating, so to say, auratic experience.[61] For Cavell, the difference between a purely mechanical and an animate mode of repetition

59. Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation," 53-54.

60. Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," 338, speaks of "Benjamin's alleged ambivalence toward aura – his being torn between the extremes of revolutionary avant-gardism and elegiac mourning for beautiful semblance [...]."

61. A more comprehensive discussion of Benjamin would have to devote more attention to the tensions that exist concerning the notions of art and aura between several of his essays. I would like to refer the reader to the major insights about Benjamin's ideas on art and aura in: Josef Fürnkäs, "Aura," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 95-146; Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura"; Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies / Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 13.1 (Spring 2004), 2-27; and Robert Kaufman, "Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire Baudelaire," *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008), 207-215.

in language is not a criterial distinction but the underlying condition of the human ability to make use of the criteria of language at all. The doubt whether we can really tell the one from the other, whether we can, for example, distinguish a machine like Olympia in Hoffmann's tale *The Sandman* from a human being, is precisely what is at issue in skepticism. It is no coincidence that skepticism in terms of regarding the animate as liveless and vice versa turns up in "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" in connection with another instance of "an uncanny anticipation of a movie camera," i.e., the spyglass through which the protagonist Nathanael perceives his beloved Clara as what we could call a mechanical reproduction:

> The glass is a death-dealing rhetoric machine, producing or expressing the consciousness of life in one case (Olympia's) by figuration, in the other (Clara's) by literalization, or say defiguration. One might also think of it as a machine of incessant animation, the parody of a certain romantic writing; and surely not unconnectedly as an uncanny anticipation of a movie camera. The moral of the machine I would draw provisionally this way: There is a repetition necessary to what we call life, or the animate, necessary for example to the human; and a repetition necessary to what we call death, or the inanimate, necessary for example to the mechanical; and there are no marks or features or criteria or rhetoric by means of which to tell the difference between them. From which, let me simply claim, it does not follow that the difference is unknowable or undecidable. On the contrary, the difference is the basis of everything there is for human beings to know, or say decide (like deciding to live), and to decide on no basis beyond or beside or beneath ourselves.[62]

If, on the one hand, Cavell's outlook on art, language and experience is likely to be deemed blind to most of the socio-historical and political issues that Benjamin is concerned with, Benjamin, on the other hand, may be blamed for not taking into consideration any concrete examples of film in his theses on the effects of mechanical reproducibility. In his most widely-read book, *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell, on the contrary, brilliantly spells out his notion of the ordinary in the interpretation of indi-

62. Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 157-158.

vidual films by taking the popular as being significantly informed by philosophical concerns. He repudiates the one-sided economic criticism of the genre of the comedy of remarriage as "fairy-tales for the depression" by directing his attention to the importance of conversation in the early Hollywood talkies.[63] Thus, the ordinary in language and the ordinary in film are both deployed in Cavell's discussions of popular Hollywood comedies, salvaging the significance of language and of the aesthetic from a disparaging view of the movies as a mere industrialized entertainment.

Cavell sometimes phrases the question of how seriously we consider texts and films as candidates for challenging our preconceived notions of what is important as a matter of letting these texts or movies "have a voice."[64] If we are inclined to discount the experience of Hollywood movies as mere entertainment, then we do *not* to let them have a voice in the matters that are most important to our lives. Our ability to do this will depend, however, on how far we believe that we can trust our own voice and on whether we are convinced that our voice counts at all. The repression of the voice, whether we take skepticism or capitalist economy to be its cause, is what both Benjamin and Cavell criticize as the "inescapably private character" of our experience. If art does not necessarily or directly entail the liberation of our voice, it does not simply let us indulge in an essentially private and incommunicable experience either. By confronting us with an experience that has to be missed in order to gain significance in its deferred retrieval, modern art allows us to gain insight into the forces that stifle our voice. Its contribution to the extension of the boundaries of possible experience resides in the way in which it shows our acknowledgment of and our commitment to the world as essential to its significance. Because the ordinary is never simply given, there are possibilities inherent in it that call on us as readers or spectators to realize them by giving voice to them.[65]

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63. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 2ff.

64. Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary," 10: "I mean the sort of emphasis I place on the criticism, or reading, of individual works of art. I think of this emphasis as letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it, and I regard that attention as a way of testing whether the time is past in which taking seriously the philosophical bearing of a particular work of art can be a measure of the seriousness of philosophy."

65. Although I was not able to revise the present article extensively in the light of our discussions and cannot presume that she would agree with everything in it, I am much indebted to Aurelia Cojocaru for her insightful comments on a previous version of this paper.