

## 5. From Automatism to Autonomy

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### Introduction

When we refer to something as automatic in ordinary language, we tend to speak of it as unconscious and working by itself — machinic, repetitive, needing no intervention or control from others to move along its natural course. If a process is automatic, we regularly assume that it happens independently of the human will. What is automated, in other words, will go on until non-human physical constraints prevent it from further labor, such as when the battery is dead in the robot or when the electricity goes out as the washing machine is running its usual course, or when one of its parts is worn out and needs repair. But if the machine “decides” that it is too tired or having a moody afternoon and wants to stop working mid-way through a task, we can’t help feeling very alarmed.<sup>1</sup> Usually, we see automatism as precluding autonomy. Its automatic nature seems to suggest that it is, or ought to be, heteronomous in the sense that its course of action remains the same until it is told otherwise, e.g., when someone else turns the switch on or off. The contrast between the two statuses is prevalent in philosophical discourses as well, notably Descartes’ thought experiment that an automaton designed to look like an animal would be hard to distinguish from the real thing, but a machine that imitates humans would be far easier to detect, due to the latter’s language and general reasoning abilities, which reflect the fact that it is guided by immaterial mind.<sup>2</sup> But, given the etymology of the two words, we can see that both notions are more intertwined than conventional overtones reveal. Autonomy, coming from *autonomos* — the Greek roots *auto* meaning “self” and *nomos*

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1. Google recently fired its engineer for contending its AI chatbot LaMDA for being sentient. See for example: Ramishah Maruf, CNN, last updated July 25, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/23/business/google-ai-engineer-fired-sentient/index.html>.

2. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), Part V.

meaning “custom” or “law” — indicates self-ruling. While automatism, coming from *automaton* and *automatos*, denotes self-acting.<sup>3</sup> Given that the realm of the self seems to be the key site shared by both notions, we may wonder whether the two ideas as separate and irreconcilable as common sense would have it.

This paper rethinks the relationship between autonomy and automatism through close readings of Thomas Kuhn’s theories regarding scientific structure and Stanley Cavell’s writings on cinematic ontology. I argue that for both Cavell and Kuhn, in contrast to the ordinary understanding of these two concepts, envision a path from automatism to autonomy. Unpacking this enigmatic path will enrich our understanding of not only both concepts on their own, but also the nature of perception in scientific, cinematic, and ethical understanding. Given the two philosophers’ divergent primary concerns, taking their accounts together sheds light on a constellation of different aspects of both concepts. To this effect, in Part I of the paper I analyze how, on the surface, the autonomy of the “revolutionary” scientist can be read as antithetical to the heteronomy of “normal science,” but what Kuhn in fact demonstrates is the centrality of the automatic nature of normal science in paving the way for the work of autonomous revolutionary scientists. I further argue that even though the emphasis in Kuhn seems to be explicitly given to the autonomy of the scientific *subject*, his theory of the incommensurability of scientific paradigms hinges on an implicit claim in this account — the necessity of the autonomy of the scientific *object* in pushing for a paradigm change. Compared to Kuhn, Cavell’s discernment of the proximity of automatism — in cinematic apparatus and modernist art — with autonomy of the object is more explicit, though no less mysterious. It constitutes one of the three “impulses” of his in speaking of an artistic medium as an “automatism.” Part II of

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3. This etymology seems to be at variance with its current usage — something which can only act when it is acted on, has no consciousness of its own, functions according to pre-coded and predetermined rules, and is at best a pale imitation of a free subject. The difficulty of drawing connections between automatism and autonomy nowadays is perhaps exacerbated by the negative connotation automatism possesses, being connected with the process of automation and Taylorism, rationalist efficiency and an extractive relationship to the world. The interconnection is further obscured by how automatism is usually associated with *techné*, whereas autonomy is usually thought of in the realm of politics and ethics. For instance, Kant — having rejected Mendelssohn’s appreciation of skillful activity as unconscious automatism, fearing that “it renders virtue mindless and unreflective” — limited the notion of autonomy to the domain of human consciousness or action. Melissa Merritt, “Mendelssohn and Kant on Virtue as a Skill,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Skill and Expertise* Routledge, ed. Ellen Fridland and Carlotta Pavese (London and New York: Routledge Handbooks Online, 2020), 88. For him, the notions of moral choice and freedom are rooted in reason and personhood, excluding automatic characteristics.

this paper unravels its inconspicuousness. Lastly, I will use a radically non-anthropocentric sequence from Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1967) to elaborate on the various automatisms involved — the automaticity of the film animals, the photographic automatism and the automatism of projection — and how they lead to seeing and acknowledging the autonomy of the object and the radical change in vision that is required to achieve that.<sup>4</sup>

## Part I. Kuhn and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

### I.1 Normal Science vs. Extraordinary Science

As the title of Kuhn's book suggests, his project revolves around a reconceptualization of the nature and structure of scientific revolutions away from a facile understanding of it as straight-forward, cumulative, and progressive practice.<sup>5</sup> He coins the terms "normal science" and "extraordinary/revolutionary science" to distinguish two different realms of scientific practices. The former denotes "the sort of practice in which all scientists are mostly, and most scientists are always, engaged."<sup>6</sup> In a mature community of science, the participants agree on and are committed to a certain set of fundamentals acquired from regular scientific education and the practices that were passed down to them in their professional training. In normal science, there exists "a strong network of commitments — conceptual, theoretical, instrumental, and methodological" — which delineate the scope of scientific examination, arbitrate the legitimacy of certain research problems, and provide the rules for conducting experiments and measurements most appropriate to the goal of further articulating existing theories.<sup>7</sup>

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4. The inclusion of the animal here is a gesture toward broadening Cavell's theory of acknowledgement to include the animals but that will not be the main focus of this paper because of different priorities and the limited scope and space. For literature on this topic, see Michael Uhall, "Creaturely Conditions: Acknowledgment and Animality in Kafka, Cavell, and Uexküll." *Configurations* 24, no. 1 (2016): 1-24; Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe. *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); and Cary Wolfe and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

5. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). Or *SSR*.

6. Kuhn, "The Historical Structure of Scientific Discovery," in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 177.

7. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 42.

On the other hand, “extraordinary science” refers to significant moments such as the Copernican revolution, Lavoisier’s “discovery” of oxygen or Einstein’s theory of relativity.<sup>8</sup> These moments designate transitions from an older paradigm in crisis towards a new one, and the process is “far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm. Rather it involves a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field’s most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications.”<sup>9</sup> The fact that the emergence of Newtonian physics and of relativity and quantum mechanics both were preceded and accompanied by *philosophical* analyses of the fundamentals of scientific research methods or goals buttresses this observation. From this judgment of how scientific changes are non-continuous, it seems natural to perceive normal and extraordinary science as separate and drastically different dualities. The former is associated with the enterprise of “individually heteronomous activity,” since it follows and obeys existing paradigms instead of intending to bring out new paradigms; the latter paints the image of scientists acting autonomously.<sup>10</sup>

Kuhn’s descriptions of the scientists participating in extraordinary research reflects self-determination. “He will *push* the rules of normal science harder than ever to see, in the area of difficulty, just where and how far they can be made to work. Simultaneously he will *seek* for ways of magnifying the breakdown, of making it more striking and perhaps also more suggestive than it had been when displayed in experiments the outcome of which was thought to be known in advance.”<sup>11</sup> The active verbs used here, which highlight the agency and creativity of the individual scientist, serve as a clear contrast to the descriptions of normal science as essentially akin to “puzzle-solving,” a highly determined activity. By emphasizing the fact that “there must also be rules that limit both the nature of acceptable solutions and the steps by which they are to be obtained,” normal science, in comparison, can be understood as

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8. Of course, the term and the stage need not only refer to world-changing or ground-breaking moments in the history of scientific development, but could also refer to “somewhat smaller, because more exclusively professional” (*SSR*, 67) changes in paradigm. The scare quotes are used in the spirit of Kuhn’s analysis of the complex nature of the discovery of oxygen, or *seeing* the element as oxygen, instead of dephlogisticated air.

9. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 85.

10. Jeremy T. Burman, “On Kuhn’s Case, and Piaget’s: A Critical Two-Sited Hauntology (or, on Impact without Reference),” *History of the Human Sciences* 33, nos. 3-4 (2020): 142.

11. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 87 (emphasis added).

intrinsically dependent on external and established preconceptions, rules and standards.<sup>12</sup> However, this conventional and schematic understanding of the duality masks an important connection between the two as they are embedded in Kuhn's account. In a recent study analyzing the structure of normal science, William Goodwin rightly contends: "Representing science with one vanishing point — be it normal science or extraordinary science — obscures the details necessary to appreciate its distinctive developmental pattern."<sup>13</sup> An exclusive focus on normal science leads to the mistaken understanding of science as cumulative; whereas when undivided attention is given to extraordinary science/scientists, "the sort of rigid reasoning required by the normal mode" is neglected.<sup>14</sup> Building on this sentiment, a closer look at Kuhn's descriptions of normal science could lead us to see it as providing *a necessary though insufficient condition* for the revolutionary moment.

## **I.2 Normal Science Leading to Extraordinary Science**

When explaining the nature of normal science, Kuhn consistently emphasizes how normal science remains instrumental to revolutionary science, but this is easily overlooked given the exciting and seemingly completely autonomous traits extraordinary science exhibits. The importance of normal science is rooted in the indispensability, or in Kuhn's words, the "priority," of the paradigm: "To reject one paradigm without simultaneously substituting another is to reject science itself."<sup>15</sup> The three types of work in which the normal scientist can be engaged include "(i) fact gathering, (ii) enhancing the contact between theoretical approach and the world, and (iii) articulation of the approach," all together contribute to "the scope and precision with which a paradigm can be applied."<sup>16</sup> Existing paradigms in scientific communities — the consolidation and further articulation of which is the primary task of normal science — serve as a constitutive vehicle for scientific theory building by providing scientists not only with a map regarding the entities that can be observed in nature, or how these entities behave, "but also with some of the directions essential for map-making," viz.

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12. Ibid., 38.

13. William Goodwin, "Mop-Up Work," in *Interpreting Kuhn: Critical Essays*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 103.

14. Ibid., 86.

15. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 79.

16. Goodwin, "Mop-up Work," 93. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 36.

the theory, methods and standards through which these entities are determined and further examined.<sup>17</sup>

The professionalization of the scientific community through its unquestionable adoption of certain paradigms, naturally leads to the rigid restriction of scientific vision as well as a resistance to paradigm changes. But that is not the whole story. Given how the paradigm directs the attention and focus of scientific practices, normal science “leads to a detail of information and to a precision of the observation-theory match that could be achieved in no other way.”<sup>18</sup> The refinement of observational techniques, the development of a special apparatus that caters to more nuanced and sophisticated experiments and observations, and the cumulation of useful data are all indispensable in creating the conditions for profound and far-reaching discoveries. This is why “pre-paradigm periods” feature numerous competing schools of thought, but since every school must carry out experiments and theoretical thinking from ground up for the lack of paradigmatic rules, the research accomplished remains rudimentary. In Kuhn’s words, “And even when the apparatus exists, novelty ordinarily emerges only for the man who, knowing *with precision* what he should expect, is able to recognize that something has gone wrong. Anomaly appears only against the background provided by the paradigm. The more precise and far-reaching that paradigm is, the more sensitive an indicator it provides of anomaly and hence of an occasion for paradigm change.”<sup>19</sup> Contrary to prevailing understandings of scientific endeavor, it is important to note that even the revolutionary scientist is not “inventing” anything *ex nihilo*. The emergence or perception of an anomaly or novelty in science requires a precise vision. These are constituted by both the field’s existing establishment and advancement in its scientific observation and method, as well as via the data it provides. Significantly, these pre-established structures and the ocean of documented information serve as a necessary backdrop for the anomaly to show itself as something *different*, demanding attention and possibly new rules. The automatic continuation of the theories, rules, or the paradigm, therefore, provides an indispensable condition, which potentially paves the way for the autonomous scientists to perform their tasks.

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17. *Ibid.*, 109.

18. *Ibid.*, 64-65.

19. *Ibid.*, 65 (emphasis in original).

The path from automatism to autonomy is also embedded in another aspect of the priority of the paradigm, exemplified by Kuhn's theory of perception. Going against what he deemed a long tradition of Western scientific and epistemological assumptions regarding the separation of the neutral and objective brute facts from interpretations of the facts, Kuhn sees "a world already perceptually and conceptually subdivided in a certain way."<sup>20</sup> Building on N. R. Hanson's thesis that all observations are theory-laden, Kuhn insists (in his early writings) that there is no fixed or neutral sensory experience.<sup>21</sup> A paradigm and the theories implied in it are prerequisite to perception itself, which means that a "strong form" of observational incommensurability exists when there is a shift of paradigm.<sup>22</sup> William Devlin defines the strong form as holding "that observation is a cognitive achievement as background beliefs influence the process of observation; that is, they influence background beliefs so strongly that it determines our perception that something is, or is not, the case."<sup>23</sup> Looking at a swinging stone, an Aristotelian *sees* a constrained fall while Galileo *sees* the motion of a pendulum; it is *not* that they perceive the same rope with a weighted entity at the end going through a specific trajectory, and then give different *interpre-*

20. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 129.

21. Quoted in Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 113; Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

22. This strong form of incommensurability, I believe, is central to Kuhn's earlier writings, especially *The Structure*, which is the main text that my analysis here builds on. It may seem to contradict Kuhn's later writings. For instance, he discusses "natural kinds" in the following way: "To say that members of natural kinds are given is to say that their properties can be established by direct observation, independent of beliefs or theories about the causes of those properties and independent also of personal or social interest in their determination [...] two people confronting the same creature or material can always — supposing they have normal sensory apparatus and speak the same language — reach agreement about its observational properties." Kuhn and Bojana Mladenović, *The Last Writings of Thomas S. Kuhn: Incommensurability in Science* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), 236-237. However, the "contradiction" is nuanced if we consider the fact that the primary examples used in *SSR* — the physical phenomena observed such as the swinging stone — do not fall neatly into the category of "natural kind" and are more complex. Furthermore, Kuhn's immediate qualification of his own description is telling: "Which properties are in fact observed and how closely the results of observation are subjected to critical scrutiny will, of course, be deeply influenced by interest and belief, and these are correspondingly important determinants of the rate and direction of cognitive development." *Ibid.*, 236. The sentiment conveyed here is much closer to that of in his earlier writings. It seems that Kuhn's later writings take a pragmatic turn to focus on the solidarity of a language/culture community and how generalizations about certain properties ought to be agreed upon. Whereas in the earlier writings, the importance (and the productive shock) in encountering a different (or historical) scientific system and culture is more prominent. The "strong form" of observational incommensurability in *SSR* compels one to examine the prejudices or beliefs in one's own time and to take seriously the claim that historical sciences and cultures, e.g., Ancient Greek science and their way of life, could have something to teach us moderns.

23. William J. Devlin, "Kuhn and the Varieties of Incommensurability," in *Interpreting Kuhn: Critical Essays*, ed. K. Brad Wray (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 108.

tations, which will be the weak form of the observational incommensurability.<sup>24</sup> The context of background theories and beliefs condition *how* we see things and *what* we see. Therefore, for perception to be possible in the first place, the “automatic” process of being in the world and acquiring experience in a paradigm-dependent world is decisive. Similar in spirit to Hans Georg Gadamer’s view of prejudice as central to his hermeneutics, both function as a set of tacit beliefs, assumptions or fore-judgements that are required to make a claim of knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Prejudice-free knowledge or paradigm-free observation is neither desirable nor possible.

In both instances analyzed above — the dependence of the revolutionary scientist on normal science in perceiving scientific anomalies and the reliance on established theories and beliefs in general perception — we see that automatism does not preclude the possibility of autonomy, but in fact plays a crucial role in preparing for something that is more autonomous to come along. But for obvious reasons the two cannot be simply equated and the activity of mere rule-following alone is certainly not going to lead to revolutionary changes. People around Galileo’s time, unlike Galileo, didn’t naturally perceive “pendulums” instead of stones. What, then, is the missing link or the ultimate driving force?

### 1.3 Kuhn’s Insight on Perception

If we look carefully at Kuhn’s description of the paradigm’s indispensability to perception itself, subtle clues emerge. “What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see. In the absence of such training there can only be, in William James’s phrase, “a bloomin’ buzzin’ confusion.”<sup>26</sup> In establishing the autonomy of the scientific *subject*, Kuhn points to a compound condition. The relationship between the two necessary parts deserves further scrutiny. The very possibility of paradigm change suggests that the scientific object and the paradigm that seeks to define, describe, and explain it are in dynamic tension.

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24. Certain slippages of the term’s (incommensurability) use might exist in Kuhn, See for instance Nelson W. Polsby’s analysis, “Social Science and Scientific Change: A Note on Thomas S. Kuhn’s Contribution,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, no. 1 (1998): 204.

25. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), Part II, 272.

26. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 113.



Importantly, any single paradigm must be open-ended and cannot possibly exhaust all facets of nature that it seeks to categorize and rationalize. The scientist will inevitably run into resistance when she tries to exhaust all possible implications of the paradigm against nature. This feeds into the evolutionary view of scientific development that Kuhn outlines, which means that “the sciences are bound to diversify, not unify; to become more fragmented, and not more integrated.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the tension demonstrates the inadequacy of any paradigm; its inevitability encapsulates an important condition often overshadowed by the autonomy of the creative scientist — the autonomy of the scientific *object*.

If nature were completely malleable to and could be exhausted by scientists’ theories, then there would be no need for radical rejection of the well-used, well-recognized paradigms. The fact that from time to time, parts of nature seem unruly and resistant to established theory or arbitrary revision shows the impossibility of its complete heteronomy. The psychological and practical difficulties a scientist goes through during periods of crisis while recognizing the need for new theories suggests a breakdown between the existing paradigm and the nature that it seeks to describe — the process may be inconvenient, costly or despair-eliciting.<sup>28</sup> The push for change must come from a necessity, when the scientific and scholarly conscience can no longer appease the discrepancy between the existing theoretical account and the external events through accounts of margins of error or accident. Adjustments must be made; new vision and action are called for. In other words, positing meaningful incommensurability between different paradigms implies that theories cannot be purely constructed subjectively or willy-nilly; they must correspond to real-existing entities even though the latter elude full articulation through propositions or language. The way that a scientific object exerts its existence is at times mysterious, subtle, and amorphous, but always real.

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27. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, “Truth, Incoherence, and the Evolution of Science,” in *Interpreting Kuhn: Critical Essays*, ed. K. Brad Wray (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 202.

28. See for instance: “Wolfgang Pauli, in the months before Heisenberg’s paper on matrix mechanics [...] wrote to a friend, ‘At the moment physics is again terribly confused. In any case, it is too difficult for me and I wish I had been a movie comedian or something of the sort and had never heard of physics.’” Quoted in *SSR*, 84.

#### I.4 Incommensurability's Implication

In Ruth Ronen's realist interpretation of Kuhn's notion of incommensurability between theories, she insists that "When one remains on the level of signifiers, incommensurability is in fact just a difference in meaning and can always be translated away. Incommensurability emerges when one acknowledges the representational aims of a language."<sup>29</sup> For incommensurability to be real and substantial, it is necessary to move beyond the realm of mere signifiers. The signifier must butt heads with the signified — the autonomy of the object, or the thing "out there," is palpable and fundamental in pushing for paradigm change. Therefore, the autonomous act of perception in the scientific subject is, on the one hand, *dependent* on the automatic immersion in the paradigm, and on the other, *inseparable* from the autonomy of the scientific object — the pendulum, in some sense, exerts itself as different from a swinging stone. However, recognizing and acknowledging the scientific object's claim on us is no easy task; becoming aware of anomalies is difficult given both the highly determining character of traditional or established practices and the inaccessibility of nature as it is. Kuhn's post-Darwinian Kantianism, made more explicit in his later writings, concedes a realm "like Kant's *Ding an sich* [...] ineffable, undescribable, undiscussable."<sup>30</sup> How, then, does one come to see glimpses of the object's autonomy, or hear its silent murmurs?

As Kuhn highlights, the transition from the paradigm in crisis to a new one is not continuous in nature. It is emphatically not the case that scientists simply build on or modify the existing paradigmatic descriptions of nature. Nor do they just offer different *readings* of the same observed facts. "No ordinary sense of the term 'interpretation' fits these flashes of intuition through which a new paradigm is born."<sup>31</sup> Like a revelation, the change is akin to a gestalt switch — it takes a specific kind of vision and viewing something as specifically different. We must take Kuhn seriously when he hesitates to liken gestalt switch completely with the recognition of anomaly and crisis or seeing under a different paradigm.<sup>32</sup> Not only does the metaphor of a gestalt switch fail to do justice to the idea that the scientist does not see something *as something*, but simply

29. Ruth Ronen, "Incommensurability and Representation," *Applied Semiotics* 2, no. 5 (1998): 183.

30. Kuhn, "The Road since Structure," in *The Road since Structure: Philosophical Essays, 1970–1993, with an Autobiographical Interview*, 2nd ed., ed. James Conant and John Haugeland (Chicago, IL: The Chicago University Press, 2000), 104.

31. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 122.

32. "That parallel can be misleading." *Ibid.*, 85.

sees it, or to the fact that the scientists do not have a choice or freedom in choosing which object they are seeing (duck or rabbit); importantly, I believe, the metaphor does not make explicit the autonomy of the object that is crucial in setting scientists up to achieve a new perception.<sup>33</sup> It is not entirely up to us, whether we are students of nature or masters of the scientific discipline, to dictate laws or regulate ways of action for the object. What needs to be highlighted is the sense of agency or dignity in the object; the fact of its separation and independence from us remains to be emphasized.

Meanwhile, a different but related account, also sensitive to the interconnections between automatism and autonomy, could help us see more clearly how the acknowledgment of the autonomous object — though “ineffable, undescribable, undiscussable” — is arrived at. When discussing the “impulses” for his speaking of an artistic medium as an “automatism” in *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell mentions that the effort of this thinking is “to free the object from me, to give new ground for its *autonomy*.”<sup>34</sup> What kinds of automatism is he referring to? The autonomy of which objects? And how is this achieved? I now turn to Cavell’s reflections on automatism in art and more specifically, film, to see how this might ultimately help us better understand the path from automatism to autonomy and find an alternative visual example to the gestalt switch for describing the revolutionary process of seeing and acknowledging difference.

## **Part II. Cavell and *The World Viewed***

### **II.1 Automatism: A Brief Overview**

Cavell’s use of the term automatism, in Sean Keller’s words, “is complicated, perhaps irredeemably so, encompassing within it the mechanical automation of the motion-picture camera, the material techniques of painting and music, and the working methods of artists generally.”<sup>35</sup> To this list we might also add: “a way of situating novel instances, thereby allowing them to be viewed as seemingly ‘happening on their own,’” a way of re-conceptualizing the notion of medium, the style and genres, the

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33. Ibid.

34. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 108.

35. Sean Keller, *Automatic Architecture: Motivating Form after Modernism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 151.

works of art themselves, and possibly, the objects that the artworks and artists seek to represent or express.<sup>36</sup>

Cavell borrows the term “from surrealism and deploys [it] in new senses,” and his other two impulses for speaking of automatism at the end of the titular chapter (ch.14) give us a glimpse of the complexity and breadth of the use.<sup>37</sup> The first intuition of automatism is that the medium is self-generating — once discovered, it compels new instances of this medium. In other words, the medium can be understood as automatism because the work, independent of the artist’s will or presence, continues to effect other instances, even though, in some sense, it will always be the same instance. The medium of painting, drama, or film, for instance, serves as an ever-replenishing source of inspiration that pushes contemporary and future artists to continually experiment with its existing and potential forms — in painting there could be works in the style of Leonardo da Vinci but also those of Jackson Pollock. The second impulse “codes the experience of the work of art as ‘happening of itself.’”<sup>38</sup> Similar in spirit to Gadamer’s description of a genuine poem and its autonomy, the work “does not stand before us as a thing that someone employs to tell us something. It stands there equally independent of both reader and poet.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the richness in the variety of its use, there are two major senses of automatism that *The World Viewed* delineates. First, there is the peculiar mode of artistic representation in cinema, different but in continuation with photographic automatism. What we conventionally refer to, when speaking of photographic automatism, is the mechanical manner in which an image of the world, or reality, is being reproduced. This is also what Cavell’s use of automatism starts with in *The World Viewed*.<sup>40</sup> In line with André Bazin’s ontology of film, Cavell points out the significance in photography’s possibility of overcoming human interference: “Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting [...] by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.”<sup>41</sup> The automa-

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36. Martin Shuster “The Ordinarity and Absence of the World: Cavell’s Ontology of the Screen — Reading *The World Viewed*,” *MLN* 130, no. 5 (2015): 1085.

37. Keller, *Automatic Architecture*, 151.

38. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 107.

39. Gadamer, “On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 107.

40. The concept is covered in Cavell, *The World Viewed*, ch. 2, 4, 11, and 14.

41. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 23.

tism exercised in photography is inherited and incorporated into film.<sup>42</sup> For the sake of clarity, let's refer to the first kind as "cinematic automatism," and the second kind "general automatism," which is formal and possibly subtends to every instance of art.<sup>43</sup>

"General automatism," related to the first but different because of film's specificity as a medium, is a broadened use of the concept to apply to artistic media in general, but especially modernist art.<sup>44</sup> The second kind of automatism induces from the medium what Cavell refers to as "presentness." The aesthetic achievement of modernist art lies in the creation of not just new works, but new media, as if, in R.M. Berry's words, "the meaning of painting or theatre *as such* were happening here and now."<sup>45</sup> Modernist art emphatically discovers the powers and constraints that its medium offers, which were given as if automatically.

## II.2 Convention, Automatism and Modernist Art

Immediately following the exposition of these "intuitions" in *The World Viewed* is a chapter titled "Excursus: Some Modernist Painting." This chapter, though in no way explicitly related to the ontology of film, nonetheless provides a crucial commentary and supplementary understanding to the mysterious impulses the previous chapter ends with. Harking back to Cavell's reflections on aesthetic modernism and modernist literariness in his earlier essays such as "Music Discomposed," "A Matter of Meaning It," and "A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," this chapter is central to analyzing modernist aesthetic media at large. Specifically, tending to this chapter carefully has implications for our conception of convention and nature, the discussion of which in *The Claim of Reason* brings in Kuhn as an explicit interlocuter.<sup>46</sup>

42. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 28. When discussing film's properties, Kracauer claims that "[t]he basic properties are identical with the properties of photography. Film, in other words, is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, thence, gravitates toward it."

43. Lisa Trahair prioritizes cinema's "primary automatism," therefore names general automatism as "secondary automatism" which "while ontically distinct are ontologically the same as the automatism of other arts." See Trahair, "Serious Film: Cavell, Automatism and Michael Haneke's *Caché*," *Screening the Past* 38 (2013), <http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-38-cinematic-thinking/serious-film-cavell-automatism-and-michael-haneke%E2%80%99s-cache/>.

44. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, ch.14 "Automatism" and ch.15 "Excursus."

45. R. M. Berry, "Stanley Cavell's Modernism," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism*, ed. James Loxley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 41.

46. This will be explicated in more detail below. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), see ch. 5 "Natural and Conventional."

Consider the work of Jackson Pollock. Similar to scientific revolutions such as Lavoisier's "discovery" of oxygen, Pollock's revolutionary contribution to painting is not cumulative — not simply another instance of the same kind of painting as before, but a total rethinking of the medium. Gombrich describes Pollock as effectuating the triumph of modernism writing:

Becoming impatient of conventional methods, he put his canvas on the floor and dripped, poured or threw his paint to form surprising configurations [...]. The resulting tangle of lines satisfies two opposing standards of twentieth-century art: the longing for childlike simplicity and spontaneity [...] and [...] the sophisticated interest in the problems of "pure painting."<sup>47</sup>

With a work like *One*, its sheer size, the spontaneous outburst and apparent lack of premeditation all suggest a radical response to tradition and a new vision of the material of paint and canvas. His practice, or creation, is not a re-interpretation of the established rules or facts; instead, in Cavell's analysis, "the mode is revelation."<sup>48</sup> The revelation brought forth is closely connected to acknowledgment in the sense that responding to modernist art requires the form of accepting or rejecting it as painting.

In pointing out the inadequacy of calling Pollock's work "action painting," Cavell speaks to Pollock's "discovery" or "automatism." What he finds remarkable is Pollock's discovery of a fact of painting — its "total thereness" — that fact that it is "wholly open to you, absolutely in front of your senses, of your eyes, as no other form of art is."<sup>49</sup> The dripped dots and lines, like Beckett's words in his dramas, "strew obscurities across our path and seem willfully to thwart comprehension; and then time after time we discover that their meaning has been missed only because it was so utterly bare — totally, therefore unnoticeably, in view."<sup>50</sup> Missing the meaning that was right there, or has been there all along due to willful ignorance or insatiable demand for other meaning, shows us that it is *we* who had been recalci-

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47. E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 6th ed. revised, expanded and redesigned (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1995), 602-4.

48. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 109.

49. Ibid.

50. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 111.

trant, blind and uncomprehending. Acknowledging the condition of painting, or modernist literariness, as “total thereness,” “presentness,” or “hidden literality” is, for Cavell, also to accept *our* presentness to it and its world. In the process of discovering this automatism, something entirely new of the medium itself *and* its relationship to the world is revealed to the artist. The revolutionary transformation that the artists have brought to the field, or to the medium they work with, makes it *seem* like their break with the discipline is so radical that it departs completely from the past, or that their works have single-handedly created a world that was non-existent before. But just like how normal science provides the methods and standards and the scope of the questions to be asked for science to function, there are, in art as well, explicit and implicit rules governing artistic genres and conventions that artists necessarily abide by or rebel against. In Keller’s words, “It is crucial that with an automatism the artist establishes a form of practice that, to some extent, *proceeds on its own, independently of the artist*, that the artist creates a process in which he or she is then caught up.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, there are constitutional similarities in how autonomous artists’ or scientists’ revolutionary endeavors depend on the automaticity in the established rules and paradigm.

By describing the task of the modern artist — “creating not a new instance of his art but a new medium in it” — as “the task of establishing a new automatism,” Cavell does not mean that the artistic products will be automatically assured excellence, but that “in mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them one’s work is assured of a place in that tradition.”<sup>52</sup> The sense of “mastering” here is nuanced. Instead of being understood as domineering, what is required of the artist, in terms of mastery, is that one must *pay attention to* and *give respect* not only the medium’s tradition and history, the circumstances or rules that make the medium possible and sustainable, but also the idea of the medium itself — its inherent conditions and possibilities.

The ambiguity in “mastering” and its paradoxical proximity to “succumbing” becomes even more poignant when Cavell discusses the intimate relationship between nature and convention in *The Claim of Reason*. Building on Wittgenstein’s

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51. Keller, *Automatic Architecture*, 152 (emphasis added).

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

notion of culture, which “does not fight against nature but brings it into being,” Cavell establishes that nature, or quasi-nature, is acquired in the process of socialization.<sup>53</sup> That is to say, in contrast to Freudian insistence on the innate drives of sexuality and aggression which meet, resist, get incorporated into or altered by civilization, Cavell reads Wittgenstein as emphasizing the priority of forms of life, such as human speech, values, and cultural practices, in rendering nature visible, and in responding to its claims. The simple bifurcation of nature and culture is no longer viable, which requires higher attentiveness to each of them *and* their interrelatedness. Perhaps one does not necessarily stand opposed to the other: conventionality is not something that human beings decide upon *completely* arbitrarily or deliberately, but in its immediacy derives from nature’s demands. In Cavell’s words, “Only masters of a game, perfect slaves to that project, are in a position to establish conventions which better serve its essence.”<sup>54</sup> In this light, we see that if mastering denotes an autonomous action, its subjugation to external rules and circumstances is in fact indispensable. The master-as-slave persona is the one that Cavell deems the person who brings about deep revolutionary changes—be it in philosophy, art or science. It is in this context that Cavell gives a reading of Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:

that only a master of the science can accept a revolutionary change as a natural extension of that science; and that he accepts it, or proposes it, in order to maintain touch with the idea of that science, with its internal canons of comprehensibility and comprehensiveness, as if against the vision that, under altered circumstances, the normal progress of explanation and exception no longer seem to him to be science.<sup>55</sup>

What we can learn from these revolutionary moments, on Cavell’s account, seems to be two-fold. First, conventions, rules or established and agreed-upon criteria are vital for the possibility of expanding or changing them. Cavell elaborates that if the task of

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53. Ursula Göricke, “Custom Is Our Nature: Cavell and Wittgenstein versus Freud,” in *From Virgin Land to Disney World: Nature and Its Discontents in the USA of Yesterday and Today*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 71.

54. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 121.

55. *Ibid.*



the modernist artist is to show that we have no *a priori* knowledge regarding what counts as an instance of their art, then this task, “or fate, would be incomprehensible, or unexercisable, apart from the existence of objects which, prior to any new effort, we do count as such instances as a matter of course; apart from there being conditions which our criteria take to define such objects.”<sup>56</sup> “A matter of course” suggests the habitual and automatic nature of our dependence on the established conventions, thereby rendering them requisite for any ground-breaking changes.

Second, revolutions come about because these thinkers, artists and scientists have a devotion to the idea of that discipline and wanted to guard it from lapsing into falseness, insincerity, or indolence. Importantly for Cavell, that idea, or ideal, is not limited to the discipline *per se*; it must have similar bearings on the self, the world, or the relation between the two.<sup>57</sup> Even though Cavell starts by referring to the autonomy of the *art object* in the “Excursus” — be it in the sense that the work is completed, “done, given over, the object declared separate from its maker, autonomous,” or the sense that it is the canvas and paint and idea realizing itself (such as in Pollock or Louis’s *Unfurleds*) — he eventually arrives at autonomy in a different dimension, the autonomy of nature:<sup>58</sup>

But to speak of an automatism which admits a sometimes overpowering beauty is a way of characterizing nature. The works of Pollock, Louis, Noland, and Olitski achieve in unforeseen paths an old wish of romanticism—to imitate not the *look* of nature, but its conditions, the possibilities of knowing nature at all and of locating ourselves in a world...For the work of the modernists I have in mind, the conditions present themselves as nature’s autonomy, self-sufficiency, laws unto themselves.<sup>59</sup>

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56. Similar comments can be found in Cavell, “A Matter of Meaning It,” in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 219, and *The World Viewed*, 106, where the modernist painting proves to us that “we do not know a priori what painting has to do or be faithful to in order to remain painting,” and that “what a painter or poet or composer has to achieve in his painting or poetry or music is not a landscape or sonnet or fugue, but the idea of his art as such.” Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 123.

57. See for instance Cavell’s claim in *The World Viewed*, 22: “Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art. Apart from this wish and its achievement, art is exhibition.”

58. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 111.

59. *Ibid.*, 113 (emphasis in original).

In inventing new automatisms, the modernists faced head-on the crisis of no longer knowing which forms worked or how to sustain the tradition in which they found themselves. For Cavell, the modernists' autonomous search for new criteria — so as to stay faithful to the *idea* of the art — does not necessitate a departure from Romantic metaphysics, despite the fact that Modernist artists and Romantic poets understand and express nature differently. Specifically, the modernists' art lets nature's autonomy shine forth — “not a return *to* nature but the return *of* it,” highlighting the reality and the weight of nature rather than that of us.<sup>60</sup> Paradoxically, through human art, the sense of nature can be perceived as what Keekok Lee formulates as the “ontological contrast to human artifacts.”<sup>61</sup> We realize that nature's self-sustaining and self-generating quality constitutes its autonomy by being made co-present with nature.

How is this achieved? How does automatism in art give us “the release of nature from our private holds” and therefore the autonomy of the natural object?<sup>62</sup> Examining Cavell's conception of cinematic automatism, which he discusses in detail, sheds light on this question. Numerous other important thinkers have devoted parts of their investigations of cinema to understand the power of automatism. However, as Lisa Trahair points out, Cavell, along with others — Benjamin, Bazin, Deleuze and Rancière — is “the one who most explicitly takes it [automatism] on and makes it the fulcrum on which his entire argument about the ontology of cinema pivots.”<sup>63</sup> What needs to be emphasized, but is often overlooked, is that within cinematic automatism, there are *two* separate yet connected automatisms — the automatism of photography and that of projection. These two substrates together constitute the material mechanism of *filmmaking* and *film-viewing*, and exercise automatism's power in cultivating a more sensitive vision that recognizes the object's autonomy.

### II.3 Cinematic Automatism: Photography and Projection

The first form of automatism (of photography) within cinematic automatism is explicit and widely discussed. Bazinian realism, a starting point for Cavell, values the art

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60. Ibid.

61. Keekok Lee, “Is Nature Autonomous?,” in *Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature: Theory and Practice*, ed. Thomas Heyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 59.

62. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 114.

63. Trahair, “Being on the Outside: Cinematic Automatism in Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*,” *Film-Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2014): 128.

of photography because of its automatic mechanism. Due to the absence of the intervening human hands in the reproductions of the world, the process of representation is rendered automatic. In indexically recording the pro-filmic world through a mechanical device in photographic images, this process promises a (seemingly) direct, faithful and unmediated recording of things and people in the world, the being of which is — as modern philosophy told us — “metaphysically beyond our reach.”<sup>64</sup>

But the complexity of the automatism involved here is definitive for Cavell; it cannot be reduced to photographic realism: “The depth of the automatism of photography is to be read not alone in its mechanical production of an image of reality, but in its mechanical defeat of our presence to that reality.”<sup>65</sup> The sense of “defeat” can fully unravel only when we acknowledge the spectator’s view. The behind-the-camera position of the photographer, or the filmmaker, renders her both outside the pro-filmic reality but also in literal continuation with the same space. It is the audience who is truly denied that reality — a space-time continuum that is in the past. Much like the first-time theater goer in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Les Carabiniers* (1963), no matter how hard one tries to climb into the scene, the showering lady on the screen remains at a distance, screened from the viewer, resists being touched or possessed. Reality as presence is done, over, sealed, and projected.<sup>66</sup> The automatism associated with projection, an essential part of cinematic apparatus in addition to photographic mechanism, is subtle but crucial.

When Cavell says that “The material basis of the media of movies [...] is [...] a succession of automatic world projections,” his own elaboration on this ontological claim remains ambiguous.<sup>67</sup> Even though semantically, the adjective “automatic” could be applied to the noun “projection,” he seems to delimit the use of “automatic” to the conventional understanding of it in terms of photographic automatism: “Automatic’ emphasizes the mechanical fact of photography, in particular the absence of the human hand in forming these objects and the absence of its creatures in their

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64. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 102.

65. *Ibid.*, 25.

66. This has intimate connection with skepticism. In Shuster’s words: “In this way, film, in general terms, perfectly mimics the experience of philosophical skepticism: the viewer experiences herself sealed off from the world.” “The Ordinarity and Absence of the World,” 1077. Skepticism, or film’s overcoming of it, is a major concern to Cavell, but my discussion here, though related to it, is not centered on unpacking this notion.

67. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 72 (emphasis in original).

screening.”<sup>68</sup> However, the quick, additional inclusion of the nature of *screening* belies a simmering thought that he doesn’t fully develop until later chapters (“Automatism” and “Excursus”). There is something exceptional in how cinema automatically *projects* the filmed world for us to view, while keeping us at a distance from it, and this specific automatism most resembles how Cavell conceptualizes automatism in modernist art. In order to see the connection, we have to appreciate the “magic” of film: “How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it *unseen*.”<sup>69</sup> The key concept of “unseen-ness,” mentioned here, is crucial to our understanding of the power of film’s automatism (in projection), and it is easily overlooked.<sup>70</sup>

#### II.4 Unseen-ness and Invisibility

Our wish for invisibility has a long history, Cavell points out. The almighty invisible ring alone finds its recounts in Plato, Wagner, Tolkien, and others. What underlies this desire constitutes an ethical problem regarding justice — would we act justly even when we do not have to be held responsible for the consequences of our actions? If by chance we found a ring that could make us invisible, would we, like Gyges, immediately contrive to seduce the queen, slay the king, and take the kingdom?<sup>71</sup> The desire for invisibility seems to take a different shape now in the modern age, as Cavell suggests: “this is not a wish for power over creation [...] but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens.”<sup>72</sup> Our relationship with the world has taken on a more contemplative and theoretical stance, leading to inaction enveloped in anxiety. The voyeuristic activity in cinema speaks to our desire for privacy and anonymity. It is not that we want the power of invisibility to do

68. *Ibid.*, 73.

69. *Ibid.*, 40 (emphasis added).

70. Both Trahair’s main explication on Cavell’s four “meditations” of automatism and Shuster’s article offer helpful and excellent analyses of the concept, but they give the idea of “unseen” marginal attention, and both highlight the importance of “the world” instead of the fact, nature, and form of *projection* within cinema.

71. See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 38. Glaucon, in telling the story, intends to prove Socrates wrong, who insists that it is to our advantage to be just and disadvantage to be unjust, no matter what the circumstances are. But Glaucon makes the case that no one is just willingly, and once laws and conventions do not apply, or when fear of punishment is out of the question, people will go about and do wrong to others when it is of advantage to themselves. And if a man were to take hold of such a ring and “were never willing to do any injustice and didn’t lay his hands on what belongs to others, he would seem most wretched to those who were aware of it [...] and most foolish too.”

72. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 40.

active injustice, but more so that we can “do nothing in the face of tragedy, or [...] laugh at the follies of others.”<sup>73</sup>

As Cavell elaborates later in *WV*, “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. It is our fantasies, now all but completely thwarted and out of hand, which are unseen and must be kept unseen. As if we could no longer hope that anyone might share them.”<sup>74</sup> The isolation of the self and the fear of the impossibility of interpersonal communication shape this new form of “feeling unseen.” Herein lies the crux of our desire for invisibility: to be invisible is not to be absent, but present and not *seen*. To be *unseen* assumes an *other*, to which/whom I appear and matter. It implies that there is always someone who *could* see me or might want to see me. And it goes reciprocally: wanting to be “unseen” is to deprive, or avoid, the possibility of this interaction, this impact. The desire to be invisible believes a desire not to bear responsibility, to avoid consequences or judgment. David Foster Wallace’s description of TV watching is kindred in its spirit:

For the television screen affords access only one-way. A psychic ball-check valve. We can see Them; They can’t see Us. We can relax, unobserved, as we ogle. I happen to believe this is why television also appeals so much to lonely people [...]. Lonely people tend, rather, to be lonely because they decline to bear the psychic costs of being around other humans.<sup>75</sup>

The spectator’s distance from the projected world is similar to the outsideness of the camera to the (pro-filmic) world, but more deeply felt. The poignant separation between us and the filmed world is embodied in the film screen — “a barrier.”<sup>76</sup> The world we see is nothing if not real, yet absent. Whereas we are nothing but present, yet invisible. It is the separation and barrier between each other that arouses loneliness; it is the skeptic conclusion, viz. an “inability to know” — I of the world and the

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73. *Ibid.*, 26.

74. *Ibid.*, 102.

75. Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York, Boston, and London: Back Bay Books and Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 22. Later in the essay Wallace cites Cavell directly. The influence seems indeed direct.

76. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24.

world of me — that fosters pessimism in our relationship with the world and with each other. We get cozy in the darkness of our subjectivity by keeping our fantasies to ourselves out of fear that others won't understand them or might use them to exploit our vulnerability. Our unseen-ness in front of the theater screen is like wearing a ring of Gyges rendered dull.

But this separation does not warrant a tragic ending at the outset. In highlighting, embracing, and acknowledging this condition of separateness, cinematic automatism uncannily — “magically” — helps to overcome the anxiety engendered by the ineliminable distance. Through film, nature is now “found,” not created. Cavell, in delineating the medium specificity of the photographic method, goes on to say that “To maintain conviction in our connection with reality, to maintain our presentness, painting accepts the recession of the world. Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it.”<sup>77</sup> The automatism in photography has a different mode of establishing conviction or encouraging our faith in the external reality, compared to other art forms — put crudely, if “presentness” shows traces of agency and freedom, then painting (especially traditional painting) preserves *our* autonomy, while photography presents the *world's*. We see the world's independence, the validity of which needs no categories of a Kantian subject.

Film continues this project of foregrounding the givenness of the world, initiated by photographic automatism, and furthers it by helping us test, resist, and rethink this givenness through *projecting* the world *automatically* to us in moving images. The world's existence on the screen reminds us that its reality is not subjectively created through our mind or out of our words; moreover, its mystery and out-of-reach-ness instruct us that to read its autonomy adequately is no easier task than understanding or achieving our own autonomy. Film's education and redemptive power lies in a re-examination of distance and separation, which does not necessarily lead to an epistemological impossibility, inducing either despair or a vengeful desire to dominate and manipulate, although it may be likely to do so.

The distance that cannot be bridged between us and the filmed world in fact grounds the possibility of genuine viewing, which receives, processes, words, and acts on the claims that whatever being within our view makes upon us. Only at a certain

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77. Ibid., 23.

distance can we put the object and the ground it stands on fully in view without cropping out its head or toe. Our ethical relationship to the world is not fundamentally a matter of knowing; our separation should not be an excuse that further fosters our moral stupidity and obtuseness. The automatism that is possible in film's world-projection is akin to what modernist art is capable of for Cavell, which "reasserts that however we may choose to parcel or not to parcel nature among ourselves, nature is held — we are held by it — only in common. *Its declaration of my absence and of nature's survival of me* puts me in mind of origins, and shows me that I am astray."<sup>78</sup> Viewing it, without "altering it illegitimately, against itself," can establish our connection with the world and others.<sup>79</sup>

Notably, the world on screen does not (usually) look back at us, but it always could. The automatic display of our being denied to the filmic world while longing to be part of it gives rise to a renewed perception of separateness, which does not excuse callousness or cruelty but lets us see that the objects in front of our eyes can be freed from our grip. Putting the world at a distance inspires in us the realization that we can see the world passing as it is, or let it happen of its own accord. The world was there without us present, and it will continue to be when we are not. It survives and outlasts us.

A specific cinematic example might be helpful here to show how this is achieved. The scene selected below unveils the essential profundity in how various automatisms — the mechanical reproduction in the photographic automatism, the automatism in projecting and viewing the world, and the "automaticity" in animals — could re-orient our sight and lead us to see that our blindness to the beings in front of us translates into violence, leading to their pain and suffering, and that distance between us does not hinder but even contributes to understanding them as autonomous.

### **Section III. Bresson's Balthazar**

Robert Bresson famously deemed automatism the essence of the natural mode of existence. He terms his actors "models," who are the performers who lay bare their

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78. *Ibid.*, 114 (emphasis added).

79. *Ibid.*, 102.

soul in front of the camera: “Models who have become automatic [...] their relations with the objects and persons around them will be right, because they will not be thought.”<sup>80</sup> Bresson’s models, importantly, are neither “actors” nor “parts” — they need neither “staging” nor “directing” and are “BEING instead of SEEMING.”<sup>81</sup> His diligence in cultivating automaticity in his models naturally extends to involving animals, who, one assumes, by nature cannot act to the same degree as human beings but more simply *be*. *Au Hasard, Balthazar* (1967) follows the titular character’s entire life from birth to death. Almost at random, the donkey Balthazar is given to one owner after another, escorted to one setting and escapes another; but no master plan is explained, he is at one moment baptized, caressed, worshipped, and praised as a genius, at others mocked, beaten, labored or considered a nuisance.

Situated at the diegetic midpoint of this dramatic piece is a striking series of shot/reverse-shots portraying the donkey Balthazar exchanging looks with four other fellow circus animals. Its temporal centrality buttresses its symbolic significance for understanding the film, though this silent section defies immediate comprehension. In this radically non-anthropocentric sequence, the technique that is often used to depict human conversation — a fundamentally linguistic form of communication — is used to give us one minute of absence of verbal speech, or explicit human perspective. This sequence of shot/reverse-shot of the animals’ looking shatters the human/animal binary and transcends it from within, since usually in shot/reverse-shots we see humans looking at each other or at other animals. Laura McMahon, evoking Derrida, observes that in this scene that “Certainly something *wholly other* appears to be at stake” — that we encounter a shared finitude that we can never own, and the sense of commonality arrived at refers to but exceeds frameworks of human understanding.<sup>82</sup> The triangulation between the camera’s eye, Balthazar’s eyes and the fellow animals’ eyes compels us to take on a visual education.

This sequence opens with a medium-long shot of Balthazar standing still, while the circus worker loads more hay on top of its back cart. A tinge of resistance from Balthazar can already be sensed when the worker leads him to the next position. The

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80. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York and London: Urizen Books, 1977), n. 32.

81. *Ibid.*, n. 1 (capitalized in original).

82. Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (London: Legenda, 2012), 56.



exchange of looks starts with the circus worker's leaving the frame as we hear roaring of a tiger. Balthazar diverts his eyes slightly (fig. 1), and the scene cuts to a tiger, lying on his belly in an iron cage, with chains dangling in the air (fig. 2). The shadows of the iron bars dissolve and merge with his beautiful furry stripes. One of the iron bars blocks exactly his left eye. He looks at Balthazar, paws in front, mouth slightly open, sits absolutely still save the breathing motion in the chest. The shot/reverse-shot is repeated and this exchange between them is shown to us twice. Similarly, Balthazar looks at a polar bear (fig. 3), an ape, an elephant, in their respective cages, silent or raucous. But only the first two exchanges have two reverse-shots while the last two were given *one* reverse-shot. What marks the difference between the last two and the first? What type of progression is suggested by this subtle numerical change?



Fig. 1: Balthazar looks at the circus animals.



Fig. 2: First exchange – tiger.

“There is a logic here, but what is it?” Brian Price in his analysis continues to observe about the ordering and structure of the shots, “What might be passing through that structure is a recognition: the coming together of beings united in suffering.”<sup>83</sup> How the recognition is arrived at and how this *togetherness* is portrayed are of the utmost importance. When we get to the ape (in the third exchange) — the only animal in the sequence that makes sounds upon seeing Balthazar — we see the dangling chain foregrounded. This highlights a double imprisonment since he is already *within* the cage — as if his expressiveness is a threat, his likeness to us a menace. This exchange contains a quick and subtle gesture: the ape looks directly into the camera, however briefly (fig. 4). We realize the conventional shot/reverse-shots established in

83. Brian Price, *Neither God nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics*, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 82.

the first two exchanges have been possibly replaced by a point-of-view shot of Balthazar. Before, we assume and understand that Balthazar and the circus animals are looking at each other; now, we view the scene as Balthazar views it.



Fig. 3: Second exchange – polar bear.



Fig. 4: Third exchange – ape looking into the camera.

The last exchange confirms the subtle but mysterious shift in perception and remains the most striking. If this were taken as a shot/reverse-shot, it would have broken the 180-rule – we see indeed both Balthazar’s and the elephant’s left eye (fig. 5 and 6). Both the camera position and the fact that the elephant looks directly into the camera suggests that, again, we are taking up Balthazar’s point-of-view. The ape’s expressiveness is replaced with complete silence on the elephant’s part; its indecipherability is absolute. It is the most extreme close-up so far – for both Balthazar and the elephant. In fact, what we have are two eyes, *tout court*. The close-up of the elephant’s eye, with its surrounding area, looks like a wrinkled old human’s eye: a circus animal now appears almost indistinguishable from us. Its head fills up almost the entirety of the frame; no trace of its imprisonment is visible on the screen.



Fig. 5: Fourth exchange – Close-up on Balthazar’s left eye.



Fig. 6: Fourth exchange – Close-up on the elephant’s left eye.

We feel astonished by the sequence because, as Arnaud puts it, “the reciprocity of looks constitutes for us an indecipherable abutment: that they have an exchange, a recognition that testifies to the thoughtfulness or the screams of animals, is perceptible but always inaccessible.”<sup>84</sup> This astonishment can also be understood as resulting from a shift in vision, however (un)conscious we are of it. Looking at the fellow caged animals through Balthazar’s perspective — a specific vision that is grounded in the animal’s world — gives us a world *observationally incommensurable* to the one seen through human eyes. We now see what we couldn’t before — that these animals have a life of their own, and their dignity is untainted by human manipulation or use. In foregrounding the animal’s point-of-view, it reminds us of our blindness and crudity, an illiteracy in reading living beings’ bodies or souls. It leads us to see the world differently, or in Kuhn’s theorization, a different world.

The possibility/mechanism of this shift of vision, where the autonomy of the other becomes primary, can be further illuminated by Cavell’s reading of the revolutionary moment described by Kuhn.<sup>85</sup> Cavell highlights, on the one hand, the importance of the scientist/artist’s intellectual “conscience” in realizing the idea and possibility of the discipline/medium, and on the other, the inherent autonomy of the depicted object. In this case, Bresson’s innovation in staging the camera-eye to assume a non-human animal’s vision, however subtle, is guided by, and underscores, the inadequacy of how the animals have been viewed. The sequence teaches us the indispensability of, in Christine Korsgaard’s words, “getting animals in view” and getting *others* in view, in the sense of not only seeing what they are, but also realizing that other beings’ lives are as just important to them as ours is to us.<sup>86</sup> Through Balthazar’s active looking, we see the animals and recognize their condition. They appear as different from mere tools for people’s merry-making or money-making; instead, they are inscrutable, dignified, putting our manipulation and cruelty to shame.

Furthermore, the way Balthazar is brought to look at the four animals resembles how film audience looks at “a succession of automatic world projections.” A ge-

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84. Philippe Arnaud, *Robert Bresson* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1986), 62.

85. See II.2 above.

86. Christine Korsgaard, “Getting Animals in View,” *Point Magazine* 6 (2022), <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/getting-animals-view/>.

nuine recognition of the distance between the onlooker and the object that *could* look back is one of the most crucial lessons we can learn from Balthazar and his fellow companions. These animals occupy different sides and separate frames, yet their unity of a shared suffering is realized despite the barriers of the cages or the discreteness of the shots or cuts. This sequence, significantly, ends with *seeing* as such — a speechless vision that perceives each other’s confinement. It makes palpable the apparatus and essential condition of film-viewing — explicated in Cavell’s account — being given views of the world on screen but kept at a distance from it. A true acknowledgement of that distance revises how we habitually receive the phenomenological separateness in the self-other or human-animal distinction. What we historically take as a necessity in the said distinction or hierarchy, manifested in the cruelty or callousness in inter-personal ethical understanding, or the captivity of the non-human animals in a human society, might be tested and resisted. An alternative can be imagined. “A relation of co-exposure and finitude — ungraspably shared with animals” becomes palpable.<sup>87</sup>

Exuding an uncanniness that is strange, *other*, difficult to interpret, this sequence shows us, as Kuhn points out, that learning to adjust to a different paradigm can be demanding and takes time.<sup>88</sup> The perceived otherness expresses autonomy, which is precarious, easily subjugated to contingent or overpowering forces. It can be inaccessible but remains real and recognizable. The shift of vision, given to us through what McMahon terms as the “patient, durational aesthetic of the film,” cultivates “a mode of ethical responsiveness, which attends [...] to a life lived rather than displayed and to the unfolding of an intimate history rather than a public spectacle.”<sup>89</sup> To see the “unfolding” requires radical perspective shifts, which cinematic automatism materializes; the reassessment of the condition and meaning of our separateness helps us notice, even at a distance, or precisely because of that distance, the object’s suffering, no matter how quiet it is.

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87. McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, 59.

88. For instance, see Kuhn, *SSR*, 53, that having awareness of anomalies is difficult; and 150-51, both Darwin and Planck’s comments suggest the difficulty of their new theories being accepted by older generation, and that there is often life-long resistance to new paradigms.

89. McMahon, “Dead Funny: Laughter, Life, and Death in Philibert’s *Nénette* and *Un animal, des animaux*,” in *The Zoo and Screen Media: Images of Exhibition and Encounter* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 257.

## Conclusion

Cavell and Kuhn share a similar commitment to the path from automatism to autonomy. Underlying both accounts of the co-presence and inter-relatedness of automatism and autonomy is an emphasis on seeing plurality and difference in scientific, aesthetic, and ethical encounters. To be able to perceive anomalies and scientific crises, the “narrow and rigid” textbook-based scientific education *alone* is inadequate.<sup>90</sup> In “truncating the scientist’s sense of his discipline’s history and then proceeding to supply a substitute for what they have eliminated,” this education makes it difficult for students of science — or of philosophy, understood as “the education of grownups” — to understand historical scientific theories or discoveries on their own terms.<sup>91,92</sup> Of course, this is not to suggest a major overhaul of the conventional and established scientific training or its progressivist understanding, which provides students with “tools of the profession, both conceptual and instrumental,” and “supplies community members with a past which is not foreign but domestic, which can be assimilated directly, and which can serve as a platform from which to move ahead.”<sup>93</sup> As this paper shows, the automatism present in these practices is in fact crucial to the autonomous “discoveries” of the revolutionary moments. But these discoveries cannot be divorced from a vision sensitive to the observed object — its agency, independence, autonomy, and how it might be different from how it has been seen. This vision, essential in both science and ethics, requires genuine historical consciousness. It can also be honed by reading/viewing works of art and giving ourselves to them. As Cavell puts it, “we are at the mercy of what the medium captures of us, and of what it chooses, or refuses, to hold for us.”<sup>94</sup> Film, specifically, satisfies our desire to be unseen by the world by projecting it at a distance from us; but instead of exonerating our responsibilities for the viewed world, film restores our sense of obligation to it by presenting the other as *other*, as autonomous. We realize that it has its own laws that might be inscrutable to us, that we cannot know it as it knows itself, but it nonetheless needs acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, and action from us. The can-

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90. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 165.

91. *Ibid.*, 137.

92. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

93. Kuhn, *The Last Writings*, 88. I am grateful to Brad Tabas for pointing me to this passage.

94. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 126.

didness of the camera and the automatism in projection constitute possibilities of the medium and teach us to “let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight.”<sup>95</sup>

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95. *Ibid.*, 25. I would like to thank Brian Price for his incredibly helpful comments at earlier drafts of this paper. Special thanks are due to Luke Lea for the productive conversations on Kuhn and various editorial suggestions. I am also deeply grateful to Brad Tabas and Paul Jenner for their patience and kindness in all the constructive criticism, edits, and feedback.