Medium and the "End of the Myths": Transformation of the Imagination in *The World Viewed*

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> I have mentioned my increasing difficulty over the past several years to get myself to go to new movies. This has to do partly with an anxiousness in my response to new films I have seen (I don't at all mean I think they are bad), but equally with my anxiousness in what I feel to be new audiences for movies (not necessarily new people, but people with new reasons for being there), as though I cannot locate or remain together with my companions among them.
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> CAVELL, *The World Viewed*

Stanley Cavell opens *The World Viewed* with an autobiographical note about a recent transformation in his own movie-watching habits. Over the course of the 1960s, he has noticed a loss of interest in attending and attending to newly released movies. It is not too strong to say that *The World Viewed* functions as an account of Cavell's personal transformation as a movie-goer, from a passionate and engaged regular attendee into someone who has lost a deep sense of urgency for contemporary Hollywood film. This moment of autobiography functions, as such autobiographical moments do generally in Cavell's work, as a philosophical datum, a fact of contemporary experience that calls for reflection and explanation. Cavell's loss of interest in contemporary movie-watching calls our attention to a general transformation in the relations between Hollywood movies and their audiences that occurred over the course of

the 1960s but continues to have implications more than forty years later for contemporary movies and their audiences.[1]

In *The World Viewed*, Cavell gives an account of this transformation as a transformation in the movies as a medium.[2] More precisely, Cavell marks for us a transformation in the relation movie audiences have to their shared imaginative capacities. Cavell's account of the transformation of the medium does not refer to any particular material or technological changes, but rather identifies it with a movement from an audience that understands itself to share in a set of fantasies to an audience that understands itself to be constituted by individual members, each responsible for her own fantasies.

I argue that Cavell's appeal to his autobiographical experience of disillusion with contemporary movies marks out this transformation in the movies as an artistic medium or, equivalently, in the transformation of the relation movie audiences have to their capacity for imagination. Prior to this transformation, the movies were organized around a problematic that explored a post-Baudelairean promise that the modern world could be made more livable through principled or collective action. After this transformation, popular movies share in a problematic that takes the possibility of action itself to be fantastic. The result of this transformation is that audiences view themselves as self-selected, having grouped themselves based on individual and atomized fantasies, and thus the movies no longer provide a haven from a skeptical worry, intensifying since the Reformation, that we can take ourselves to share a world together.

First, I clarify the role of autobiography in Cavell's philosophical work generally, in which the sensitive appeal to individual experience can serve as a general

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1. The transformation in the nature of the movies Cavell diagnoses in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) marks a change both in the relation audiences have to their imagination and the artistic problematic governing the movies. The importance of this transition in the history of Hollywood has been widely noted but the aspects of it Cavell emphasizes are underappreciated. Standard histories of Hollywood movies often refer to the earlier period as Classic Hollywood and the later period as New Hollywood and I will sometimes adopt those terms to mark the different sides of the transformation Cavell describes. For a standard treatment of this transition see Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

2. The most extensive and insightful treatment of Cavell's work on the relation between philosophy and film in *The World Viewed* is William Rothman and Marian Keane's *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000). Stephen Mulhall has recently taken up Cavell's interest in allowing popular film to challenge philosophical understanding in his *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008), which consist largely in readings of the *Alien* series.

critical claim. Second, I argue that Cavell understands artistic medium in terms of the form of organization given to the audience's imaginative capacities. For Cavell, an artistic medium is a method for achieving particular aesthetic effects and thus a means of organizing an audience's experience in a particular way. Third, I demonstrate that Cavell's autobiographical report of a change in his moviegoing habits articulates a transformation in the medium of the movies because what Cavell describes is a transformation in the relation movie audiences had to their imaginations. Prior to this transformation, audiences shared in a collective fantasy that modern life could be made habitable through collective action and individual style.

After this transformation, audiences increasingly thought of themselves as expressing their individual tastes in watching movies, rather than participating in fantasies shared among neighbors and strangers and across generations. As their self-conception of the relation they had to their imaginations shifted, audiences explored a new imaginative problematic, one that views the possibility for successful action in contemporary life as fantastical. Finally, I show how this transformation in the artistic medium of the movies that Cavell articulates in *The World Viewed* remains central to how contemporary movies audiences are organized, and even more broadly, how contemporary audiences are entertained and informed.

I.

In the preface to *The World Viewed*, Cavell describes the book as a "metaphysical memoir"; his account of film is simultaneously autobiographical, drawing on his particular experiences at the movies, and a general characterization of the nature of movie-viewing in terms of relations with a world.[3] However, the appeal to the autobiographical in Cavell's work on film is not a rhetorical flourish or personal indulgence. Instead, because Cavell understands an artistic medium to be something that has to be discovered by artists in creating for their audiences, hence something that essentially has a history, Cavell's own experience at the movies has an ineliminable role in the philosophical characterization of the nature of movie watching. Cavell's

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3. Cavell, *World*, xix.

appeal to the autobiographical in his writings on film shares the structure of the appeal he makes to what he calls philosophical data in his philosophical work more generally.[4] This form of argument starts by acknowledging a particular experience and then asks, given the fact of this experience, what must be the case in order that there could be such an experience? The transformation in the experience of movie-going over the course of the 1960s is not a merely personal change in Cavell's own habits; rather, he testifies to a quite general transformation in the nature of the experience.

Cavell's commitment to a philosophical methodology that draws on the autobiographical in order to ground metaphysical claims stems from his understanding of the methodological commitments shared in the ordinary language philosophy of Austin and Wittgenstein. Cavell is especially struck by the insight, operative for both Austin and Wittgenstein, that attentiveness to what a thing is called allows one to better understand what the thing is. Importantly, knowledge of what we call a thing can only be articulated by thinking about what I, as a competent speaker of the language, call the thing.[5] Cavell recognizes that the autobiographical does not simply give access to what is said in language; in principle, insight into what is shared in experience more generally can be gained through sensitive appeal to the autobiographical.[6] That a claim grounded in the autobiographical has a universal scope stands in need of critical confirmation, to be tested by the reader in measuring her own experience against the claim.

Cavell's autobiographical testimony about the change in his moviegoing habits has the same status as Cavell's critical descriptions of particular movies. Those criti-

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4. Cavell raises the question of what counts as data for philosophizing in "Knowing and Acknowledging" (238-41), "The Avoidance of Love" (270-71), and "Music Discomposed" (181). All appear in his *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). In each of these essays, what counts as philosophical data itself appears as a philosophical problem. In his later work, Cavell abandons talk about philosophical data while continuing to thematize the problem of philosophy's starting place. The opening pages of *The Claim of Reason* are the most prominent later example of this line of thinking — see *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 3. In all cases, Cavell's suggestion is that philosophy begins as a response, a response to a particular fact, or experience, or prior bit of philosophizing that calls for explanation and thinking.

5. See, for example, Cavell's discussion of the role of the autobiographical in ordinary language philosophy in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" (62-70) and the title essay (11-16) in *Must?*

6. Cavell demonstrates his commitment to expanding this methodological approach to experience more generally early in *The Claim of Reason* by working out its implications in a political register, centered around the problems involved in politically representative speech. See Cavell, *Claim*, 22-25.

cal descriptions are, on the one hand, autobiographical, in that they are reports of Cavell's own experience. On the other hand, the fact that Cavell had this experience of a particular movie is less important than that this particular movie yields this experience, a fact that can be tested by any interested reader.[7] What matters here is the nature of the experience. In one sense, the experience is personal, that is, it must be an individual's. On the other hand, the individual has the (intimate, personal) experience she does because of the nature of the experience. In other words, Cavell's appeal to the autobiographical is based on the metaphysics of experience; just as any claim in language must be articulated, and so articulated by someone, so too any given experience is the exercise of particular capacities, and those capacities must be exercised by someone. Cavell's ability (or the ability of anyone competent to exercise the capacity, for this is the heart of his appeal to the autobiographical) to describe such an exercise correctly can only be tested by readers against their own exercise of those capacities.

Our ability to test Cavell's claims in *The World Viewed* by watching the movies he cites, and so sharing his experience of them, is fundamental to the text's philosophical work. In this way, his generalized appeal to this autobiographical moment of transformation in his movie-going habits brings to mind one of Cavell's philosophical touchstones in Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Early in that essay, Emerson remarks, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men — that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense."[8] It is the nature of human experience that it is necessarily personal and that it is, beyond our willingness to acknowledge it, shared. Of course, that a given experience is, in fact, shared can only be confirmed, in each case, by means of a sensitive articulation on the one hand and, on the other, a willingness to test that articulation against further experience.

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7. A commitment to the shared experience of movies not only pervades Cavell's writings on film but was the touchstone of his pedagogical approach to movies over the course of his teaching career. Through the work of collective memory, the class was able to articulate together their shared experience of the movie. He registers this commitment at various moments in *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), his published version of the course on Moral Reasoning offered for many years to Harvard undergraduates. All of the even-numbered chapters of that text (each addressing a particular movie) register this commitment in offering a short description of the movie's sequences. See especially, the chapter on *Stella Dallas*, in which the work of group memory in the classroom is made explicit (272-73).

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 132.

II.

Cavell's use of the concept of artistic medium in *The World Viewed* can be difficult to articulate, in part because the concept operates in at least three different registers. It is worth briefly distinguishing these three registers before turning to the particular implications of Cavell's account:

1) There is a common use of artistic medium to refer to the technological or material substrate out which works of art are made. This is not the primary way in which Cavell talks about medium in *The World Viewed*. Cavell never invokes this conception of medium in isolation in order to determine the appropriate artistic effects based on an *a priori* analysis of the substrate, as is often the case with other medium theorists.[9] Rather, the appeal to the material basis of the medium operates in conjunction with, and analytically secondary to, at least one of the other registers; if an artistic aim is specified, the material basis of the work of art can be analyzed as a method for achieving that aim.

2) Medium is used to refer, not to film in general, but to the movies. This is the primary use Cavell has for 'medium' in *The World Viewed*. On this use, movies, documentaries, animation, and television are distinguished as different mediums, not because they necessarily have distinct material or technological bases but because they have distinct aesthetic aims that organize their audiences quite differently. Further, a medium's underlying problematic, that is to say, its aesthetic aims and the possibilities determined by those aims, can shift. The history of the medium is then the history of these related problematics. The problematic in a given artistic medium can change without there being a corresponding shift in the underlying material or technology that are put to work in achieving different aesthetic aims. Such a transformation in the nature of movies occurred in the United States by the end of the 1960s; Cavell's experience of it gave rise to *The World Viewed*. This analysis of the transformation in the nature of the movies remains an underappreciated aspect of Cavell's work on film generally, and that text in particular.

3) In order to mark out the particular possibilities that constitute the medium

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9. Rudolf Arnheim, in his *Film as Art*, offers a paradigmatic instance of this type of analysis of film and its material basis in order to prescribe the appropriate aesthetic effects. See Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957).

of the movies, Cavell distinguishes between a medium and its media. Because the medium is a means or method for achieving a general aesthetic aim, the media of the medium are particular capacities for achieving related effects that can be isolated within the medium. When thinking about the media of the movies, Cavell has in mind elements such as genres, stars, and character types.[10] Such media are distinct, if related, artistic possibilities available for exploration and development within a given medium. When a medium transforms, its transformation is constituted by a large number of these media disappearing and different ones emerging. In marking the transformation in the medium of the movies as he does in *The World Viewed*, Cavell is describing the disappearance of a number of related media — types of stars and genres that were artistic possibilities to be explored by Classic Hollywood — the emergence of different media — new types of stars and stories to be explored.

In order to clarify both the shape of Cavell's understanding of how an artistic medium can transform independently of any merely material or technological basis and the role of the autobiographical in his account of the movies as a medium, it is helpful to contrast Cavell's work on film with an example from the history of painting.[11] Michael Fried has pointed out that in France at the end of the 1860s and beginning of the 1870s, painting underwent a radical change.[12] In the work of Monet and his contemporaries, the aim of painting was no longer, as it had been for at least a century previously, to engage the audience's moral imagination in beholding a mo-

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10. In Cavell's later work on film, he invokes what is arguably a fourth register for talk about artistic medium: namely, genre-as-medium. See his discussion of this concept in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), and "The Fact of Television". In my view however, this approach to genre is best thought of as a refinement of his earlier distinction between a medium and its media, in that it develops an account of how one of the movies' media — genre — functions as a set of artistic possibilities to explore.

11. This is not to say that technological changes do not play a role in the type of medium transformation Cavell and Fried both describe. The Impressionists drew on new developments in pigments and in new techniques for painting outside of the studio; the transformation in the relation between movie audiences and their imaginations coincided with the increasing competition between movies and television. But these technological developments receive aesthetic significance when they are put to use for achieving an artistic aim. They themselves do not determine on their own their artistic implications.

12. Fried's account of this transformation of French painting, while developed over the course of three works covering the history of French painting from Greuze and Chardin through Manet, first emerged in conversation with Cavell during the 1960s. It is certainly no accident that these conversations gave rise to both Fried's history of French painting and Cavell's *The World Viewed*. These approaches to the history of art share an understanding of artistic medium that is not tied to mere material conditions but instead is grounded in characterizing problematics that in turn dictate the distinct logics of the discovery and exploration of the medium.

ment in which the character of a person or action is revealed. Rather, for Monet and the Impressionists, the aim of painting is to engage the audience in a visual experience that captures a moment of play between light and shadow on particular surfaces.

One thing to note about this transformation is that it occurred without any determinative changes in the material or technological basis of painting — both Manet and Monet used oil paint on canvas, for example. Instead, the problematic that had driven developments in French painting up through Manet — the problematic involved in imaginatively apprehending a moment revelatory of character in action — had exhausted itself or, at any rate, worked itself out. At that point, a new problematic — one having to do with the nature of visual experience rather than one centered on the moral imagination — was discovered and began to drive developments in painting. It would be a mistake to think that this transition in French painting from Manet to Monet could be adequately described as the move from one genre of painting to another. Such a description would treat the change in question as a mere transition in types of painting. Instead what is at stake in this change is the nature of painting itself — what its aims should be, what counts as good or serious instances of it, and so on. Describing the change in question as a move from one dominant genre of painting to another presumes that what counts as painting is held constant. But the transformation precisely places into question the nature of the artistic medium: that is to say, what painting is and aims to do has itself changed. On this understanding of medium, the aesthetic effects aimed for in the work of art structure the medium; the medium is a particular means for achieving a given aesthetic aim.[13]

This transformation in the nature of painting not only serves as a model for understanding Cavell's account of the movie as an artistic medium but also offers a con-

13. Talk of artistic medium is a way of indicating the relation between a capacity to achieve certain artistic effects and the material basis of the work of art. There are two ways of developing this relation, however. The first is to isolate the material basis of works of art and, through analysis of the material, identify the effects proper to such material. Rudolf Arnheim's approach to questions of medium, in his *Film as Art* for example, works on this model. The second is to identify a particular set of aesthetic effects and then to ask how different material bases structure such effects differently. This latter approach is developed by Gotthold Lessing in his *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward A. McCormick (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), in which he begins with a particular aesthetic effect — namely, the depiction of bodies in action — and then distinguishes painting and poetry as different methods, that is, different spatio-temporal forms of organization capable of achieving such an effect. Cavell's approach to questions of medium inherits Lessing's basic orientation to them; that is, he identifies a set of aesthetic effects and asks himself what the material basis for them is and how this material basis structures them, rather than first identifying a material basis and asking himself what its appropriate effects are.

trast that allows us to begin to locate the role of the autobiographical in *The World Viewed*. In articulating the transformation in French painting from a problematic grounded in the moral imagination to a problematic located in the nature of visual experience, there is no need to appeal to a personal experience because the logics of both problematics have already been fully developed. Fried's articulation of the transformation of French painting occurred a full century after it took place. Not only had the problematic governing the painting up through Manet's work been fully exhausted but the subsequent problematic, the one grounded in the nature of the visual experience, had itself developed, culminating in the high modernist explorations of the mid-twentieth century. By the time Fried's work on this transformation between Manet and the Impressionists began, a new problematic had emerged — one governing the logics of the pop, minimalist, and conceptual movements. Cavell's work on film, on the other hand, appeared during the transformation he articulates. That transformation was still underway and the artistic problematic characteristic of New Hollywood was still nascent. For this reason, Cavell's autobiographical testimony regarding his own alienation from the contemporary experience of movie-going was the only means of articulating this contemporary transformation; he gives voice to the loss of the problematic that has come to an end even though the new problematic has not yet fully emerged.

Cavell understands medium as the nexus of a set of artistic possibilities to be discovered and developed:

> [T]he aesthetic possibilities of a medium are not givens. You can no more tell what will give significance to the unique and specific aesthetic properties of projecting photographic images by thinking about them or seeing some, than you can tell what will give significance to the possibilities of paint by thinking about paint or by looking some over. You have to think about painting, and paintings: you have to think about motion pictures.[14]

Understanding the aesthetic possibilities of a medium requires experiencing and critically engaging with the history of the medium, grappling with prior instances of the medium and recognizing what effects were previously aimed at. New works in the

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14. Cavell, *World*, 31.

medium develop in the context of such a critical understanding. In identifying the medium in terms of the artistic possibilities that can be discovered and developed, Cavell understands the medium to be a method for achieving particular artistic effects: "A medium is something through which or by means of which something specific gets done or said in particular ways."[15] In this way, he resists a view of medium in which the capacities for particular artistic effects are to be located in and hence determined by the physical material out of which works of art are made. Rather, the capacities in question can only be located, on Cavell's account, in the relationship between artists and their audiences. A medium "provides, one might say, particular ways to get through to someone, to make sense."[16] These artistic possibilities are capacities for aesthetic effects that are shared by audiences; a medium is a general method discovered and developed by artists for organizing audiences in specific ways and thereby achieving particular artistic aims. In aiming for particular effects, the audience is organized around a specific problematic in which the possibilities for achieving those effects are worked out. In identifying the movies as a form of organization for the imagination, Cavell underscores the role of movie viewing in exercising the moral imagination, determining the moral nature of the world on view and the kinds of actions possible within such a world.

III.

In order to mark the transformation in the medium of the movies at stake in *The World Viewed*, Cavell describes the course of two related historical developments that together prepare for this transformation from one problematic and set of aesthetic aims to another. These two historical developments, both of which predate the emergence of film technology, can be understood as structural conditions of the imagination; that is, these developments are changes in how we conceive our own relation to our world, and so which fantasies and fears typify these ways of living.[17] The

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15. Cavell, *World*, 32.
16. Ibid.
17. Our imaginative capacities do not stand in strict contrast, as it were, with how things really are. Instead, our ability to imagine how the world is — its character, what kinds of things are possible in it, and so on — allows us to make sense of the world and to develop ways of living in it.

first historical development, which I will call the post-Reformation worry, is characterized by the withdrawal of God as guarantor of our connection to the world, which means that the individual feels increasingly responsible for her own connection to the world. One's own subjectivity can seem like a barrier to one's ability to share a world with others. The second, more recent, development, which I will call the post-Baudelaire promise, is a shared understanding of the nature of the *modern* world, in which the world can be made habitable and allow for private happiness through shared work and stylish gesture. In *The World Viewed*, Cavell claims that the best movies of Classic Hollywood fulfill this post-Baudelaire promise, allowing audiences to see ways of making the modern world livable. The movies are well-situated to deliver upon this promise of private happiness insofar as the movies put a shared world into view in a way that feels unmediated by our individual subjectivities. I will show that the transformation that Cavell is only in position to gesture towards is a transformation in the movie audience to the movies and to each other; this transformation makes the movies no longer able to deliver upon the post-Baudelaire promise. Instead, a different problematic, what I will call action as fantasy, structures the aesthetic aims of the movies of the New Hollywood.

Cavell identifies the first historical development as emerging early in the modern West with the Protestant Reformation. God either continuously retreats from one's experience or becomes an increasingly intimate aspect of a given individual's own subjective experience.[18] In either case, individuals sensed themselves as isolated within their selves, detached from the rest of the world and trapped in their own subjectivities:

At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation. The route

18. Descartes' skeptical arguments in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) provide a paradigm case of the shape of this post-Reformation worry. The initial work of the skeptical voice in the *Meditations* is to convince me that I can only know my own consciousness. From there, I then must generate proof of God's existence, which will in turn serve to guarantee that my consciousness is not misled and is generally correct in its perceptions of the world and others. If the proof of God's existence seems less compelling than the initial skeptical arguments however, I seem to be trapped in my consciousness without any guarantee that anything outside of my subjectivity can be known.

to conviction in reality was through the acknowledgment of that endless presence of self.[19]

The individual's connection to the world around her comes to feel increasingly and intensively mediated by her own self-consciousness. Thus, the individual starts to lose her grip on the possibility that she shares a world with others in any meaningful sense.

On Cavell's view, this imaginative condition — that people felt evermore trapped inside their own individual consciousnesses, without any clear guarantee that their worlds were shared, possessed together — allows us to understand why the movies should have become so immediately popular. The technological developments that made possible moving photography did not create a need to establish an unmediated relation with the world; rather, these technological developments arose in response to this long-standing and intensifying need to have a relation to a world not mediated by one's own consciousness.[20] People were ready for the movies because the movies project worlds for audiences to share, experience together, automatically. We can share the world of the movie inasmuch as we are not able to act in it but act in projecting it together.

The post-Baudelaire promise is that shared work directed toward good ends can succeed in improving the world and that the stylish individual — Baudelaire's *flâneur* — is able to find a form of private happiness surrounded by others. Cavell refers to this shared understanding as "the myths." Cavell locates these myths about the nature of modern life in Baudelaire's analysis of the work of the magazine illustrator Constantin Guys in "The Painter of Modern Life." Baudelaire identifies the value in

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19. Cavell, *World*, 22.
20. This is the upshot of Cavell's critique of Bazin's account of the relation between painting and photography. On Bazin's view, painting turned to abstraction and away from representation in response to the development of photography; photography was mechanically, and so perfectly, able to fulfill a need for representing the world that painting could only ever imperfectly achieve. For Cavell, this way of describing the relation between the emergence of photography and the development of European painting misidentifies the needs driving those developments. On his account, photography did not replace or supersede painting. Instead developments in each field arose as differing, contrasting responses to our desire to guarantee our relation to the world: "One could accordingly say that photography was never in competition with painting. What happened was that at some point the quest for visual reality, or the 'memory of the present' (as Baudelaire put it), split apart. 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." (*World*, 23).

Guys' work as a commitment to capturing the immediacy and vibrancy of modern experience. Cavell argues that the categories of modern experience Baudelaire finds catalogued in Guys' work have been the natural subjects for the movies:

> 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. Let me simply recall the titles of his chapters, pondering them against our knowledge of cinema: Fashion, The Man of the World, Crowds, The Child, War-Sketches, Pomps and Ceremonies, The Military Man, The Dandy, Cosmetics, Women and Courtesans, Carriages. Here are stores of cinematic obsession.[21]

These modern obsessions presented themselves as persistent and rich topics for cinematic exploration. For Cavell, these myths, articulated by Baudelaire decades prior to the emergence of the apparatus of motion pictures, offered a shared vision of modern life and presented a shared mode of response to the challenges and opportunities understood as characterizing the modern world.

These stores for cinematic obsession eventually, on Cavell's account, were depleted or exhausted. His autobiographical report of the changes in his moviegoing habits tracks this general dissolution of a shared imaginative understanding of the nature of the modern world and the aptness of particular gestures as responses to that world, what Cavell calls "the end of the myths". The shared understanding of the character of the modern world as a world that can become habitable through collective action and individual gesture came to end. This shift is not merely a feature of Cavell's experience, but a shift in how we understood a modern world to be inhabitable. For example, Cavell claims it is no longer possible to share in the belief that a man who is quiet in the face of the bustle of the modern crowd is harboring deep spiritual fires, has lashed himself to an original creed or a personal principle, and cannot be moved by the temptations and violent threats that continually buffet him:

> We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that men doing the work of the world together are working for the world's good, or that if they are working for

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21. Cavell, *World*, 43.

the world's harm they can be stopped [...]. We no longer grant, or take it for granted that stylish dumb women are as interesting as stylish intelligent ones; we don't even think they look alike [...]. We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that a man who expresses no feeling has fires banked within him; or, if we do grant him depth, we are likely not to endow him with a commitment to his own originality, but to suppose him banking destructive feeling.[22]

The disappearance of these shared convictions, shared modes of understanding and responding to modern life, is the end of a specific set of possibilities with the artistic medium of the movie. From the point of the view of the content of the myths that disappeared, we can describe this transformation as a transformation in the imaginative understanding of the nature of the modern world. Cavell himself, in *The World Viewed*, only asserts the fact of this dissolution of shared fantasy and indicates the lines along which the dissolution took place.[23] This dissolution of the shared fantasy of making modern life livable means that the movies' ability to provide a haven from and response to the intensifying sense that individuals are trapped in their own subjectivities has waned.

One way to describe what has changed is in terms of the transformation in the underlying problematic that governs the stories that movies are able to tell; from this point of view, the post-Baudelaire promise of finding ways to live happily in the modern world was replaced by a new problematic, in which successful healthy action is, in different ways, seen to be a fantasy. After this transformation, if the movie shows characters successfully develop their own agency, then either the world of the movie or the characters in it are explicitly fantastic. Alternatively, the world of the movie can seem more or less realistic, but at the cost of the protagonist's conception of her agency revealing itself as a fantasy and thus subject to disillusion.[24]

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22. Cavell, *World*, 60-67.

23. Certainly part of the dissolution of these shared myths is that the implicit racial and gender privilege encoded in them came under intense pressure. That is, it came to seem that what had been shared was a vision of the ability of certain white and male gestures to make the modern world inhabitable. Thus, in retrospect, the question of the extent to which the myths had in fact been shared by all members of the audience was thrown in relief.

24. This paper is not the place to develop an account of this later problematic in a way that would parallel Cavell's account of the early in *The World Viewed*. Instead, I choose to emphasize the formal nature of the transformation in the relation between movie audiences and the imagination. I will note that this later problematic has two generic strains that are worth acknowledging briefly in order to indicate the nature of the transformation at the level of the content of the imagination. On the

But we can also approach the problem from the point of view of the formal relation between the movies and their audiences. From this formal point of view, the content of the shared myths, and the fantasies that replaced them is not our immediate concern. Instead, what matters is that the myths were in fact shared. Prior to 1960, movies were screened as part of a program that ran on a continuous loop. Audiences arrived at any point, watched the program for as much or as little as they wanted, and left when they wanted. Beginning in 1960 and accelerating throughout the decade, the way in which audience organized themselves shifted.[25] No longer slipping into an ongoing program, catching it as they will, audiences began to arrive at movies together at set times, as if it was theater, as Cavell puts it.

This change may appear to be a minor shift in viewing patterns. In fact, it is a major transformation of the audience's relation to its own imagination. Prior to this transformation, audience members could, and often did, simply decide to go to the pictures, without any further decision about which movie they were going to see. Once movies were screened at set times, this was no longer possible. Instead, individual audience members had to decide which movie, of all those being screened, to attend. Such a decision requires a transformation of self-understanding. In particular, one chooses what to screen based on one's own self-conception of one's individual tastes:

> Now that there is an audience, a claim is made upon my privacy; so it matters
> to me that our responses to the film are not really shared. At the same time
> that the mere fact of an audience makes this claim upon me, it feels as if the

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one hand, there is the development of movies that are action spectaculars; in these, a protagonist is able to act successfully inasmuch as the audience is aware of and embraces the fantastic nature of both the world on view and the protagonist who is able to navigate that world and save it. The original *Star Wars* is a paradigm case of this fantasy about the possibility of action, but a myriad of action movies in the 1980s further explored the possibilities for successful action in similar ways. The other strand of this problematic is the development of movies that are imagined to be set in a real world, inhabited by real people who behave in recognizably human ways. In these New Hollywood movies of the 1970s, the audience comes to understand that attempts to act are, in the real world, frustrated, disappointed, or delusional. Here — in movies like *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) — the possibility of successful agency is a fantasy about which the movies' characters are disillusioned.

25. Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) was the first American movie to screen at set times. This functioned as a way to market the picture and emphasize the importance of seeing the movie from the beginning. It continued to be a marketing angle for particular movies in the early 1960s. *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), for example, had a poster that insisted that audiences could not miss the first five minutes of the movie.

old casualness of moviegoing has been replaced by a casualness of movie-viewing, which I interpret as an inability to tolerate our own fantasies, let alone those of others.[26]

The new form of audience for the movies constitutes a new relation to a shared set of fantasies, in which individual audience members no longer recognize the fantasies in which they participate in viewing the movies as shared, but rather as expressions of individual tastes. Further, not only do individual audience members think of themselves as exercising their imaginations at the movies in order to express their individual tastes, but they are also anxious about taking too seriously the content of the fantasies, about acknowledging the depths at which these ideas and emotions matter. In downplaying the importance of these fantasies and thinking of them as expressions of individual tastes, audience members limit the extent to which they share in their responses to the movies they watch and spare themselves from having to reflect on the nature of the fantasies explored in movie-viewing.

Prior to this transformation, audience members could think of themselves as participating in a shared set of fantasies, ones that belonged generally to a community.[27] Being able to duck into the theater at any point in the program loop encouraged this sense that the myths being explored on screen were, in some sense, communal, at any rate, that they did not depend on individual and private acts of the imagination. One could be anonymous in the dark of the theater while still participating in a shared, hence public, imaginative act, apprehending the character of the world viewed: "When moviegoing was casual and we entered at no matter what point in the proceedings [...], we took our fantasies and companions and anonymity inside and left with them intact."[28] Because the fantasies on view in the movies were general and widely shared, one need not feel that one's private fantasies were implicated or exhausted in one's movie-viewing.

Perhaps most importantly, the myths on view for all to see at the movies were understood as shared across generational lines. The myths — this post-Baudelaire

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26. Cavell, *World*, 11.
27. One need not have felt oneself to share in this joint act of imagination, perhaps for reasons of gender or racial exclusion. What remains important to the point at issue here is that the imaginative act that such a person felt estranged from was taken to be shared by others, just not oneself. In this sense, these myths were shared, even though many understood themselves to be excluded.
28. Cavell, *World*, 11.

promise — had been, prior to this transformation, in principle, heritable; audience members understood themselves to participate in a set of fantasies shared with their parents and with their children.[29] The end of the myths in particular meant the end of the heritability of a fantasy, shared across generations, about the livability of the modern world.[30] That these myths were maintained across and by multiple generations simultaneously meant that they were something that one could grow into and take on for oneself and so learn to live in them and through them. Rather than understanding these myths as already reflective of one's own subjectivity and tastes, one could discover oneself in the appreciation of them.

For audiences that have decided which movie to see when, their relation to the capacity for imagination is different. These later audiences are necessarily self-selecting, sorting themselves based on each individual's evaluation of her own taste, her subjective desires and pleasures. The importance of the emergence of an American market for European and art films is an example of this fragmentation of audiences based on self-selection according to individual tastes. This act of self-selection, individuation, and demographic fragmentation is crucial because an individual audience member no longer understand herself to be primarily participating in a collective fantasy structure, one shared with friends, with neighbors, with family members young and old, and with strangers who happen to be into the theater at the same time. Instead, an audience member understands herself to be participating a fantasy structure that is, in the first instance, fundamentally her own, and the extent to which it is shared, it happens to be shared by people like her, those who happen to share her (individual and subjective) tastes. Audiences that self-select based on individual judgments of taste no longer understand themselves to be participating together in shared myths, but to be only contingently sharing one's own fantasies with other individuals who happen to have similar taste.

In marking out this autobiographical disinterest in habitual movie-going, Cavell thus allows us to understand this post-Baudelaire promise, the shared imaginative

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29. At stake in the heritability of these fantasies across generations is the question of with whom one imagines to share both one's world and one's way of understanding the world.

30. It was certainly no coincidence that the fragmentation of the audience, and the commercial crisis of Hollywood movie production in the 1960s, initially centered itself along generational divisions. For production companies, this meant looking for projects that would appeal to the "youth market." That such a search could happen at all already indicated a radical transformation in the organization of audiences.

understanding of the nature of the modern world and the range of gestures that allow it to be habitable, as an interlude within the ongoing post-Reformation worry of an ever intensifying subjective connection to the world. As in the case of painting between Manet and Monet, one may say that the medium of the movies transformed, resulting in a different problematic governing the development of the medium. For Hollywood in the classic era, the governing problematic explores how to make the modern world inhabitable; the underlying aim is to imagine how to live a modern life. After the transformation in the nature of the movies that Cavell delineates, the underlying aesthetic aim had shifted to one in which the possibility of successful agency reveals itself, more or less, as fantastical. On this side of the transformation, imagining ourselves in a world in which we would be capable of acting so as to make the world more livable, more humane seems like an escape from the (imagined) realities of our world or a form of self-delusion.

Cavell's autobiographical confession of disillusionment marks this loss of an experience that was communally shared, hence not conceived in terms of merely subjective responses. In this sense, *The World Viewed* serves as an elegy for a shared way of life with movies that, by the end of the 1960s, had been transformed.

IV.

We can identify at least three ways in which this transformation of the audience's relation to its imagination continues to shape contemporary experience. First, movie audiences continue to organize by self-selecting according to the individual's view of her own taste and, relatedly, the problematic under which effective agency is imagined as fantasy remains dominant. Second, this self-sorting audience has made possible increasingly individualized experiences with personal screens. Third, the self-selection of the audience has underwritten a proliferation of commercial and political strategies that consist in segmenting a population or a market in terms of demographic, economic, and taste considerations and then crafting appeals to those distinct segments based on the individual member's sense of herself as individual.

That Hollywood movies remain expressive of contemporary worries about the possibilities for healthy and constructive action in the modern world can be con-

firmed by attending both to Hollywood's big action spectacles and smaller scale dramatic and comedic fare. The recent proliferation of superhero movies indicates the extent to which an explicitly fantasy world and a fantastic protagonist are necessary conditions for contemporary audiences to apprehend successful action that improves the world and makes it more livable. Only such fantastic figures or an explicitly fantastic world can give the violence underlying the ability to act the moral worth it needs. Even contemporary movie comedies, in which the protagonists overcome their difficulties and achieve a kind of success, generally depend on a moment of disillusionment and facing up to the realities of contemporary life in order achieve something more modest than originally dreamed.[31]

The fracturing of a self-selecting audience continues to reinforce production and distribution strategies based around appeal to particular demographic slices of the overall population. Moreover, the emergence of a self-selecting audience is not just a constitutive fact of contemporary movie-viewing experiences. Such a self-selecting audience plays a crucial role in the proliferation of individualized screen technologies. Individuals increasingly tailor their own viewing experiences to personal screens, and then share collective screening experiences based on a mutual understanding of shared idiosyncratic tastes. It is now a fact of contemporary imagination that we collectively imagine ourselves to be individuated as audience members, only weakly and contingently related to each other by coincidence of taste.

In addition to the proliferation of personal screening technologies, the transformation of the audience's imaginative capacities from understood as shared to understood as individualized and reflective of personal tastes also has facilitated a more general view of how contemporary social relations are organized. As members of both a viewing public and a polity, we take ourselves to be a population individuated along demographic lines. The population consists in distinct segments along a variety of axes, typically racial, gender, class, and age. Members of the population are individuated according to the intersection of these various demographic axes. Such strategies depend on individual members of the population at large understanding themselves to be essentially individuated and more or less contingently related to other members

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31. Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2012), to cite a quite current example, depicts a protagonist whose fantasies about her own potential inhibit her ability to become fully adult and must be punctured so that she can learn to take care of herself.

of the population depending on which demographic axes are under consideration. The self-conception of oneself as atomistic contributes to the difficulty of understanding one's interests as shared in common.

Cavell's appeal to the autobiographical at key moments in *The World Viewed* serves to delineate, not a personal change in his own moviegoing habits, but rather a critical shift in the ways in which movie audiences in the United States relate to their imagination. Prior to this transformation, audiences understood the fantasies exercised in movie-viewing to be communal and cross-generational; after the transformation, audiences conceived of the fantasies exercised in movie-viewing to be the responsibility of individuals and reflective of individuals' tastes. Such a transformation in the structure of the audience and its imagination gave rise to a new problematic about the possibilities of agency that makes possible the development of the movies in new directions. Broadly speaking, prior to the transformation Cavell indicates, the movies were governed by a problematic that explored the possibilities of modern life being made habitable. After the transformation, that problematic was replaced by one in which the possibility of successful agency has itself explicitly come to seem to be only a fantasy. That we take ourselves to be expressing our individual fantasies in moviegoing and our related contemporary screen experiences means that we are increasingly less willing to acknowledge the extent to which these fantasies about the limited possibilities of effective agency are broadly and deeply shared and less able to think clearly about why they are so shared.[32]