Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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“Film is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, because it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes.”

Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cavell 1979a: 188f.)

5 A Moving Image of Skepticism? Philosophy's Acknowledgement of Film

5.1 Illusion and Reality in Film History

The exploration of the diffuse borders between reality and illusion, fact and fiction, dreaming and waking state, certainty and doubt is an integral narrative and aesthetic tradition throughout the history of cinema. It is no happenstance that one of its most important pioneers, George Méliès, is a stage magician turned filmmaker who joyfully experimented with the cinematograph’s potential to manipulate cinematically rendered impressions of reality.130

Méliès and his contemporaries initiated a venerable cinematic tradition: Many other early narrative fiction films exploit the affinity of human beings to mistaking daydreaming, fantasy or hallucination for reality, for instance *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* (Wiene, 1920), *DER STUDENT VON PRAG* (Ewers and Rye, 913, remake by Galeen, 1926), *DER MANDARIN* (Freisler, 1918), and *SHERLOCK JR.* (Keaton, 1924). This tradition was continued in the era of sound film, most notoriously perhaps in *THE WIZARD OF OZ* (Fleming et al., 1939), Akira Kurosawa’s *RASHOMON* (Kurosawa, 1950), Michelangelo Antonioni’s *BLOW-UP* (Antonioni, 1966), Federico Fellini’s *8 1/2* (Fellini, 1963), or Ingmar Bergman’s *SMLTRONSTÅLLET* (Bergman, 1957). For instance, Kurosawa’s drama explores the tension between an indispensably subject-dependent human perspective on the world and the equally inherent aspiration to attain objective, or at least truthful accounts of events and actions in the world.

The tendency to scrutinise the idea of objective truth persists in Bergman’s, Antonioni’s, Fellini’s films and in the works of other art house filmmakers from the 1950s to the 1970s. A borderline figure is Alfred Hitchcock, who throughout his career (which spans from British silent cinema of the 1920s to the days of decline of the

130 Examples are the vanishing lady in his *ESCAMOTAGE D’UNE DAME AU THÉÂTRE ROBERT HOUDIN* (1896), the dancing heads in *LE MELOMANE* (1903), or the dreamed-up presence of the moon in an astronomer’s office in *LA LUNE À UN MÊTRE* (1898). Méliès’ film art just received a cinematic comeback in Martin Scorsese’s 3D homage *HUGO* (2011). In her monograph *The Neuro-Image*, Patricia Pisters correlates the ways in which stage “magicians and filmmakers alike play with the spectator's attention and awareness” (Pisters 2012: 85) in her discussion of *THE ILLUSIONIST* (Burger, 2006) and *THE PRESTIGE* (Nolan, 2006).
Hollywood studio system in the 1970s repeatedly exploited the cinematic opportunities offered to films about psychologically disabled characters, unreliable narratives, and misleading camera and sound direction. Even a distinctly un-Hitchcockian film like REBECCA (Hitchcock, 1940) revels in the pitfalls of deception the Cinderella-like, nameless heroine (Joan Fontaine) has to endure as the second wife of a wealthy husband who is haunted by the memories of his first wife who died under mysterious circumstances. Other famous Hitchcock films which play with the unstable relation between illusion and reality, belief and make-believe are classics such as VERTIGO (1958), the long-concealed revelation of Norman Bates’ schizophrenic mind in PSYCHO (1960), or the meditations on the reliability of photographically rendered impressions of events in the world in REAR WINDOW (Hitchcock, 1954). Other Hitchcock films which are inhabited by schemers, deceivers, schizophrenics, or which deliberately aim at misleading or irritating their film audiences include THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1934 and 1956), SHADOW OF A DOUBT (1943), DIAL M FOR MURDER (1954), SHABIDEUR (1942), NORTH BY NORTHWEST (1959) or MARNIE (1964). Looking at these examples, one might be tempted to call Hitchcock’s way of filmmaking a cinema of deception.

More recently, David Lynch appears obsessed with the narrato-aesthetic potential of the cinematic reality-illusion divide in films such as ERASERHEAD (1977) or later endeavours such as LOST HIGHWAY (1997), MULHOLLAND DRIVE (2001), or INLAND EMPIRE (2006).

Contemporary “mind-game films” (Elsaesser 2009a) and other complex narratives refine this tradition of cinematically challenging human perceptions or interpretations of reality. Christopher Nolan’s films centre around what Patricia Pisters calls the “brain-worlds” (Pisters 2012: 27) of their main characters: For instance, MEMENTO (NOLAN, 2000) uses a radically non-linear narrative structure which mirrors the short-term memory loss of its main character Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), which results in his distorted evaluation of events, actions and persons he encounters. INCEPTION (Nolan, 2010) is a heist film in which industry spies literally enter the various levels of their victims’ dream worlds. INCEPTION subverts the conception that dreams can only be experienced by the dreamer alone: The construction of inhabitable dream levels suggests the possibility of sharing the world of the dreamer, of living in non-material shared worlds which resemble life in the real world to such an extent that at some point it is not entirely clear anymore which is reality and which is a dream.

Two other films, THE ILLUSIONIST and THE PRESTIGE focus on the mind-games which fin de siècle stage magicians play with each other and their diegetic and extra-diegetic audiences. That is, the characters of the films play mind-games with their theatre audiences within the diegesis, while the films play mind-games with their cinema-audience.

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131 REBECCA was Hitchcock’s first Hollywood film. The adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s bestselling novel was the pet project of producer David O. Selznick, then one of Hollywood’s most powerful figures. It was the first and last time Hitchcock had to direct contract work without any significant amount of control of the filmmaking process (see Truffaut and Hitchcock 1967: chapter 6). For an account of the psychology of deception employed in REBECCA, see chapter 3 of Yanal 2005: 16-30.

132 Note that early filmmakers are also under the impression of Freud and Jung’s then still new and revolutionary works on the human psyche.

133 See also chapter 8.

134 For an in-depth analysis of the narrative structure of MEMENTO, see Klein 2001. Henry Taylor argues that “what Memento is really about is cinematic storytelling and the process of watching a movie.” (Taylor 2012)
audience. Christopher Nolan has explicitly described THE PRESTIGE as an exploration of the illusionist possibilities of the medium of cinema, and thereby joins ranks with the Méliès strand of cinematic tradition.  

The mind-game film which perhaps gained the most attention from current film scholarship, apart from MEMENTO, is FIGHT CLUB (Fincher, 1999). Fincher’s psycho-thriller literally enters the brain-world, and consequently the distorted perceptual world of its schizophrenic main character, played by Edward Norton. While the film accurately displays the experiential world view of Norton’s character, who believes that his schizophrenic alter ego Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is actually another person, it does not accurately represent the (assumed) state of the world: There is no Tyler Durden; he is only the imagined counterpart of the main character’s schizophrenic self-perception. FIGHT CLUB is an example of a mind-game film which focuses on the manipulability and the distortions of human perception of the world, and by doing so the film continues the cinematic tradition established by Méliès, Wiene, Hitchcock, Kurosawa, Antonioni, Fellini and other earlier filmmakers.

Skepticism films as well play with the variable contrast between illusion and reality, but they shift the focus from the manipulability or distortedness of human (or film audiences’) perception of the world to ontological questions about the ‘reality’ of reality. The plots of mainstream blockbuster vehicles such as MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999), THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998), THE ISLAND (Bay, 2005), or the already discussed borderline case INCEPTION are built around such questions. INCEPTION can be characterised as a skepticism film because it suggests the possibility of not only inhabiting a dream world but of sharing it with other persons. The idea of sharing a dream qua literally inhabiting it runs counter to any traditional understanding of the concept of dreaming, which is usually regarded as the quintessentially private realm of the dreamer. For instance, compare INCEPTION to other dream-world films such as WAKING LIFE (Linklater, 2001), ABRE LOS OJOS (Amenábar, 1997) and the latter’s remake VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001): All immerse their main characters into a dream state (near-death experience in the first, cryostasis in the second and third film) in which they appear to interact with other persons who eventually turn out to be mere (computer-generated) mental projections of the protagonists.

All these skepticism films explore plots in which protagonists knowingly or unknowingly navigate between different reality levels or find that the world they live in is, literally speaking, not what it seems to be. This is most evident in MATRIX and THE TRUMAN SHOW, where the initial Lebenswelt of their characters is either entirely computer-generated or a fake TV studio representation of small-town life. In skepticism films, early cinema’s psychoanalysis-inspired undertcurrent of “life is a dream or fantasy,” (projected on the silver screen mostly with the help of films that involve mentally unstable characters), has been – under the impression of the rapid victory of computation-based technologies – transformed into “life is simulation”.

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135 See the interview with Nolan in the special features of the DVD and Blu-ray edition of the film.
136 Chapter 8 discusses in more detail how skepticism films fit in the current cinematic tendency towards increasingly complex filmic narratives. An in-depth analysis VANILLA SKY, ABRE LOS OJOS and INCEPTION can be found in chapter 11.
This survey of films and filmmakers, by no means comprehensive, suggests that skeptical doubt about the reality status of the world comes natural to cinema even beyond the confines of the genre of skepticism films. Cinema is related to concerns about the possibility of knowing the world on two levels: **Firstly**, films such as the ones already mentioned exploit the idea that there might be a gap between reality and human notions of reality for narrative and aesthetic purposes. **Secondly**, the very process of filmmaking as well as the ontological constitution of the film medium already raises questions about the relation between the so-called ‘reality’ of filmic worlds and the (physical) reality their creators and spectators are a part of. This suggests an integral role of skepticism in serious theoretical reflection about cinema in general. It is not only the problematic difference between film reality and physical reality (or between the film world and the real world) which is addressed by such reflections, but also the very understanding of what “reality” means in the employment of both concepts.

### 5.2 Screening ‘Reality’ in Cinema

Stanley Cavell addresses the latter aspect when he asks, in his seminal film-philosophical study *The World Viewed*, “[w]hat happens to reality when it is projected and screened?” (Cavell 1979a: 16). Cavell spells out his answer by playing with the ambivalent meaning of the English word “screen,” which can both be used as a verb “to screen” and as a substantive “screen”: According to Cavell, the silver screen “screens me from the world it holds – that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me – that is, screens its existence from me.” (Cavell 1979a: 24). Cavell’s answer hints at what one could call the ontological Janus-face of film, since the medium screens a reality which is at the same time present (to its audience) and absent (because it is only screened). What is more: in being present to its spectators during the process of film perception, the reality screened by a film affirms its very absence in Cavellian film philosophy. The very purpose of a film screening is to project a world that has been previously recorded or assembled elsewhere (in the case of live screenings of sport events, for instance, the event projected even almost simultaneously takes place elsewhere).

The ontological status of this film reality is dubious since it is not something spectators can access, because they are ontologically and temporally absent from it: The audience of a film is *ontologically absent* since spectators occupy a different ontological realm compared to the fictional characters on screen (they cannot interrupt a love scene on screen). The audience of a film is *temporally absent* since it witnesses a screening of

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137 See also Früchtl 2013: 208.
138 Here, Cavell’s position is obviously influenced by Bazin and based on assumptions about photography’s recording mechanisms. In another part of *The World Viewed*, Cavell writes that “[p]hotography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it.” (Cavell 1979a: 23).
139 A film audience member is unable to enter the diegesis of a film, which would be inaccessible to the audience even if it were present at the film set when the film scene is shot. The diegesis of a film is situated in a completely different ontological realm, a realm which is closer to the world of literature than to the physical world. Common knowledge of this fact makes metalepsis such an effective and surprising narrative device because it apparently neglects the mutual ontological absence of audience and film characters. One of the filmmakers who repeatedly uses metalepsis is Woody Allen: Allen even bases an entire film on the effects of dissolution of the ontological barriers between the world of the audience and the world of the film: *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Allen, 1985). While the film’s protagonist Cecilia, played by Mia Farrow, is watching her favourite film of said title for the umpteenth time, her favourite character Baxter (Jeff Daniels) suddenly turns to her on the screen, starts talking to her and then leaves the screen in order to begin a love affair with Cecilia. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is inspired
past events which have been shot and assembled before being screened in movie theatres, on TV or internet websites. In this way, the reality presented by film is one which is at the same time present to its audience as well as absent from it, even more since it does not, physically speaking, exist. It exists only in the mind of its spectators, in the sense that it is constituted by the very act of being perceived. This is true also for live-action films which display a physically extant fraction of the reality we know, because in the process of recording it is transposed from a physical reality into a filmic reality. For the world of the film, the proverbial Berkeleyan philosophical dictum esse est percipi – to be is to be perceived – is actually true: No film world without a spectator (or the possibility of a spectator).

This statement holds for film in particular, but can – with variations – be applied to art in general: Works of art are products of human culture, and in that respect made for human beings to perceive them as works of art (or as works of fiction). There are gradual differences, however, depending on the general, basic correlation that applies to the specific artwork: While the “material basis” (Cavell 1979a: 72) of a sculpture is usually a processed piece of solid material, films are that which Cavell terms “a succession of automatic world projections” (Cavell 1979a: 72), i.e. configurations of light and shadow and sound waves, from which, qua perception of it, results that which we call the “film world”. Of course, this succession can be projected on a screen without ever being perceived by a spectator (or, even more radical, even the recording itself could have happened entirely automatically by some strange course of the world). But whatever is being projected is not identical with the fictional space of the film because, for instance, spectators perceive the two-dimensional projected film space as a three-dimensional (fictional) space, and because they construct a unified fictional film space from the succession of disparate shots.

This is also why Cavell’s dictum that “[a] painting is a world; a photograph is of the world” (Cavell 1979a: 24) is only valid to a limited extent: Of course, the causal connection between a live-action film recording or photograph and its objects is, at least partially, of the world, while there does not seem to be such a direct causal connection in traditional painting. But this all-too facile correlation blurs if one considers the developments of abstract art, where, for instance, the traces left by a brush or other painting tools become the topos of the painting, or if one considers photorealist painters such as Chuck Close or Mike Gorman, who aim at adapting the reality effect of photography to the painted canvas. Also, historically, one should not underestimate the

by the “film within a film” setup of Buster Keaton’s SHERLOCK JR., in which the main character falls asleep during a film screening and in his dream enters the scene projected through the screen, as if the canvas is actually a theatre stage. Even in traditional theatre, audience members are unable to participate in the events enacted on the stage, even though they are physically able to enter the stage. But their presence would destroy the diegetic illusion maintained by the play.

This double absence is formulated by Christian Metz in terms of the “scopic regime” (61) which cinema subjects its (voyeuristic) spectator to, as outlined in The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema: “For its spectator the film unfolds in that simultaneously very close and definitely inaccessible “elsewhere” in which the child sees the amorous play of the parental couple, who are similarly ignorant of it and leave it alone, a pure onlooker whose participation is inconceivable” (64). Both quotes can be found in Metz 1982. For a general account of Metz’ theory of cinema and the notion of the scopic regime sketched above, see Casetti 2011.

Josef Früchtl describes the relation between audience, screen and film outlined by Cavell in terms of an “imaginary access” to the film world while ontologically spectators do not have access to the film world while it is being screened. For Früchtl, the most important feature of this ontological exclusion is that film spectators are excluded from this fictional world as agent (“als Handelnde”). See Früchtl 2013, 208.
role of indexical tools such as the *camera obscura* for painters such as Canaletto or Vermeer, who used it for rendering correctly the details and proportions of their subjects.

In the case of contemporary film, it is also questionable to claim of films such as *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), or the outer space scenes in *Star Trek* (Abrams, 2009) or *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas, 2005) that they are simply “of a world” in the sense claimed by Cavell. Such films bring to the fore a general trait of narrative fiction films: They construct imaginary spaces which to a lesser or greater extent rely on recordings of the world – but the world which is eventually perceived by the spectator is, in any case one which does not exist without being imagined by the spectator.

Considering the intricate relation between world, world projections and the spectatorial perception of such projections, it is rather unsurprising that cinema’s alleged affinity to skepticism is a constituting element in classical film theory: Thinkers such as André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer or Jean Epstein, and later psychoanalysis-inspired theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry (Baudry 1986), are fascinated by the peculiar analogies they discover between the way in which the (formerly) new medium of cinema records or elsewise registers reality, and philosophical ideas which run under the name of skepticism. Perhaps best-known is the excitement of realist film theorists about the alleged ability of the film and photo camera to ‘bridge’ the gap or divide that persists between the world “in all its virginal purity” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15) and the imperfect, incomplete or inaccurate world view of the human beings which inhabit that world. The film theorist and philosopher David N. Rodowick calls such gap assumptions “skepticism’s division of consciousness from the world by the window of perception” (Rodowick 2007a: 141).

Said theorists only indirectly use such analogies as genuinely skepticist ones, since in classical film theory skepticism, i.e. the assumption that there is something wrong with the human epistemological or existential position in the world, is often the unacknowledged grounding basis of the claims of theorists.142 If this is an accurate characterisation of at least some of the classical film theories, as the following sections will claim it is, then skepticism is also a key factor for understanding the history of thought about cinema.

### 5.3 Film as Moving Image of Skepticism

For Stanley Cavell, whose book *The World Viewed* is characterised by Rodowick as “the last great work of classical film theory” (Rodowick 2007a: 79), there is more than a mere analogy between the medium of film and skepticism. Film’s ontological Janus face, its strange mixture of presence and absence, implies an inherent connection between both:

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142 See, for instance, Malcolm Turvey’s influential study *Doubting Vision. Film and the Revelationist Tradition* on the work of the film theorists Balázs, Epstein, Kracauer and Vertov, who he sees as standing in a revelationist tradition. According to Turvey, revelationists believe that cinema possesses the “ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision” (Turvey 2008: 3). Turvey’s study extends to implicit assumptions in certain modernist theories of art.
“Film is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, because it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes.” (Stanley Cavell 1979a: 188f., bold highlights are my emphasis)

This is a bold claim which needs further clarification: “film is a moving image of skepticism” – i.e. a moving image of the idea that we may (or even do) not “know what we think we know” (Stroud 2000 [1994]: 174) about the world. By saying that film is a moving image of skepticism, Cavell establishes a general claim about the properties of the medium of film, and not about some films or even a single film, since he does not write that “films are moving images of skepticism”.

Cavell motivates his relating of film to skepticism by introducing another, similar relation between a spectating human being and some kind of ‘reality’. He claims that “our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist”. I.e., for someone who is in a skeptical predicament, the sensorial impressions of (film) reality, or at least significant portions of it, have no corresponding factual (or, using Deleuzian parlance, ‘actual’) reality, even though they create some kind of (phenomenal) reality. According to Cavell, however, film does not only raise this possibility – he even calls this cinematic entanglement of reality and impressions of reality “a fact,” and not a mere possibility, as in weaker versions of ontological skepticism.

What is more, for Cavell the very act of “viewing […] is all it takes” in order to render film a “moving image of skepticism;” and indeed, as claimed before, the world of the film is constituted by the act of viewing it (and, one should add, hearing and feeling it). But it is a world which provides an impression of reality that does not exactly correspond to a real world. One might be able to find in the world an actor called Christian Bale dressed up in a bat suit, but he would not be the Batman you encounter on the cinema screen. Similarly, you might be able to find a fake space ship that resembles the Millennium Falcon, but it would not be the STAR WARS hyper speed machine you know from the cinema screen. Contemporary digital cinema further complicates the issue: On a set, you will not even be able to meet the animated characters you see interacting on screen with real-life actors: in some cases, on the set you will see a tennis ball dangling from a rope about the height where the head is supposed to be. If Performance Capture Technology is used, someone dressed in a tight black diver’s suit with dots and lines attached to it will function as the blueprint for the animated character later screened in the cinemas. The unsurprising lesson to be drawn from this is: The world of the film is only fictionally real, in the sense that it does not ‘exist’ materially while we are viewing it. It is a world which is inaccessible to us, because it exists in a different ontological realm.

A few sentences later, Cavell extends his claim about the relation between film and skepticism:

“In screening reality, film screens its givenness from us; it holds reality from us, it holds reality before us, i.e. withholds reality before us. We are tantalized at once by our subjection to it and by its subjection to our views of it.” (Cavell 1979a: 189, my emphasis)

Here Cavell introduces a range of different nuances in which film “screen[s] reality,” all of which establish a strange intimate relation between whatever is considered as reality, screened reality and its spectator(s). Screened reality is held at a distance from
the spectator while at the same time being constituted by her through the very act of spectating. In two senses of the word, the silver screen of the cinema theatre functions as a barrier to the world it screens: It projects the world we see and thus makes it perceivable to its spectators, but at the same time it functions as a barrier which bars access to this world (see Cavell 1979a: 23-25). Buster Keaton’s SHERLOCK JR. and Woody Allen’s THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO both rely on the surprise effect of the ontological transition which constitutes the core of their plots (see footnote 139 in this chapter).

Elsewhere, Cavell asks

“[h]ow do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. […] It is as though the world’s projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition.” (Cavell 1979a: 40f.)

Viewing unseen is another variation of the screening of reality; it is structured by the same absence-presence-relation, the same distance-closeness relation. The skeptic at the cinema is released from her usual “fixed distance” from the world, is able to explore it in ways not possible in real life – but at the same time it is only a projected world, this time even in a mechanical sense. However, Cavell here claims that the magic of cinema is constituted by the possibility it offers to see the (cinematic projection of) the world unseen. Strangely, however, the subsistence of this kind of world (which can be perceived by an unseen spectator) depends on exactly this: on the presence of a spectator. Only a spectator is able to transform the propped world of film with its fake facades and assembled montages into a fluid, seamless, 'wholesome' world.

No film world without a spectator, and no spectator without a film world. As film spectators, we are subjected to the reality of the film, which is screened in front of our eyes while at the same time being inaccessible to us, since – unlike the characters in the films mentioned – we cannot enter the film frame and become part of the diegesis. We are also subjected to this world because it is not under our control: Either we accept its subsistence in its entirety – or we leave the screening room, or switch off the TV or mobile display. Contemporaneously, however, the reality of a film is subjected to our views of it, since the receptive potential it offers only becomes actualised in the consciousness of its spectators. The world of a film does not exist outside of the heads of its spectators. And this means: The claim that film is a moving image of skepticism is intimately connected to the way in which we assess the relation of film to its audience.144

In preparation of this assessment, let us resume the result of the preceding paragraphs first: Film presents us with a world that gives an impression of reality while it only exists in the minds of its spectators; the impressions of its spectators do not have a

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143 Eva Sancho Rodriguez steered my attention to this passage.
144 Cavell’s claim also plays with the ambiguity of the adjective “moving”: Film is moving because of its kinetic characteristics, and it is moving because it emotionally affects its spectators. Film, then, is skepticism in motion, and it is (potentially at least) a version of skepticism which actually affects people because single films act out the hypotheses advanced by rather detached philosophical discourse.
counterpart in ‘physical reality’. This world, the filmed reality as such, is inaccessible to its spectators, just as the real world appears inaccessible to the skeptic. Film is a moving image of skepticism also because its recording mechanisms and viewing conditions parallel the everyday situation claimed by skeptical positions.

Simultaneously, however, the very fact that the world of the film is constituted by the possibility of spectating it subverts the analogy between film and a certain variant of skepticism: If skepticism is merely understood as the epistemological worry that human beings might be unable to perceive the world accurately, while the existence of such a world which gives rise to our cognitions of it is not put into question – then the worry of the skeptic is that the world which we perceive or think about is a distortion or even fiction of the real world, the world “as it is,” so to speak, while leaving the notion of the existence of an external world intact. Traditional skepticist worries are directed at the correspondence between our notions of the world and the factual constitution of that world. But if the subsistence of the world of the film is dependent on the presence of at least one spectator – again: no film world without a spectator –, then the analogy between film and skepticism fails at this point. Film is a moving image of skepticism – but only insofar as it highlights certain aspects of the skepticist predicament, among them the assumed gap between the spectating human being on the one side and the ultimately inaccessible world she spectates on the other.

The relation between film and spectator thus can only partially be characterised in skepticist terms, but Cavell’s arguments are sufficient for maintaining that “skepticism is not simply a topic examined by certain films but an issue that is central to any real understanding of our relationship to the medium of cinema” (Mulhall 1994: 223), as the Cavellian philosopher Stephen Mulhall remarks in his study of Cavell’s work, Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary. Still, it is not sufficient for establishing the metaphor of film as a moving image of skepticism as a comprehensive analogy for the relation between the world and its (human) inhabitants.

5.4 Cavell and the Skepticist Impetus of Classical Film Theory

Cavell’s claim that film is a moving image of skepticism, and in this respect some form of acknowledgement of skepticism, is particularly interesting because film – and its mediatic family member photography – has been, implicitly or explicitly, described by a number of earlier classical film theorists as an antidote to the threat of skepticism. One of them is André Bazin, who is interested in the psychological effect of cinema and the way its photography-based, seemingly mechanic and neutral recording mechanism appears to eradicate all human intervention from photography’s (and film’s) representation or rendering of reality.

The aesthetic qualities of photography, according to Bazin in his essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” reside “in its power to lay bare the realities,” to “present [its object] in all its virginal purity to my attention,” “stripping [the perception of] its object of all those ways of seeing it” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15). Thus, photography succeeds in delivering a “natural image of a world that we neither know nor can know” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15). Bazin implies that human ways of seeing reality consist in

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145 Compare also the following quote from Bazin’s essay “The Myth of Total Cinema”: “The guiding myth [...]

André Bazin and skepticism
seeing aspects of reality and, consequently, only parts of it (and indeed Bazin uses the substantive “realities” instead of “reality” in the quote above, implying that there is no single, unitary “reality” in the first place). To see an aspect of reality implies seeing it from a certain perspective, in a certain way. But it consists not in seeing reality as it is, which seems to be what Bazin alludes to in talking of “lay[ing] bare the realities”. Perceiving aspects of the world is like putting layers over its “virginal purity,” layers which function like veils that screen us from seeing the world as it is (veils that function as filters which simultaneously ‘distort’ whatever is perceived as well as select from the abundance of material present in front of them).

Bazin even writes that the “photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 14) This suggests that the camera not only succeeds in objectively connecting humans to the world, it also succeeds in freeing the objects of perception from their bondage to the Kantian Anschauungsformen (forms of sensibility) of time and space, which somehow allows to grasp them independently of their temporal and spatial dependence. However, the ironic twist to this idea is that in order to consider these “freed” objects they must in turn be re-perceived by a subject which is again tied to Kantian Anschauungsformen. But even so, the fundamental insight remains valid: photography and film perpetuate the pictorial presence of things and events past, such as deceased persons who were alive in another time and place.

The anti-skepticist potential of photographic representations of the world is grounded in the mechanistic character of their processes of creation: “[f]or the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 13). This claim, of course, is too general, as has been noted repeatedly in scholarly literature: Even though photographic images in fact are the result of mechanistic, i.e. automatic, recording processes. Humans intervene in the creation of photographs in various ways, through frame selection, choice of film stock, selection of camera perspectives, etc. However, in Bazin’s ontology, the mechanistic recording process assures a direct, uncontaminated connection between the photograph/moving image and the entities photographed. The Bazinian moving image is an index of the world it is a recording of.

Because of this emphasis on the seeming objectivity of the mechanic photographic or cinematic recording process, Bazin is particularly exemplary for realist film theorists. However, he is not a full-fledged realist: in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” he traces the psychological effects of the recording process of cinema and photography without explicitly (albeit implicitly) subscribing to these views. Similarly, in “The Myth of Total Cinema” Bazin builds on the “imaginations” of film pioneers of “cinema as a total and complete representation of reality” (Bazin 1967 [1946]: 20), which he terms as the “guiding myth” of an “integral realism” (Bazin 1967 [1946]: 21) which guides the artistic endeavours of his contemporaries.146

146 Following his own account of philosophy as providing refractions rather than representations of reality, in his book Philosophy and the Moving Image John Mullarkey dismisses such attempts to form concepts of a ‘total cinema’ or ‘pure cinema’ which is allegedly able to screen reality ‘as such’: “‘Reality’ too is a process to participate in. Once we have accepted this, we can forego the myth of a pure cinema that would correspond with, capture or...
Cavell’s work on film is strongly informed by Bazin’s writings. Similar to Bazin and other classical film theorists, Cavell reflects on the absence of the human hand and the involvement of automatism in the creation of film’s (and photography’s) projection of reality. But he disagrees with the idea that film can present us with reality as such “in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15). Cavell prefers to say, in a more cautious fashion, that “the basis of the medium of movies is photographic and that a photograph is of reality or nature” (Cavell 1979a: 16).

Realist film theorists hoped to find in film (and photography) an ally which allows them to bridge the gap that allegedly persists between, on the one side, the world as it is, and human beings who perceive the world on the other side. The discovery of a bridging device is what is regarded as the antidote to skepticism. For Cavell, the very hope that film might close the gap is misplaced. He evades any easy affiliation with film realism since he is all too aware of the epistemic limitations of the camera:

“I am content to proceed on the assumption that the camera is no better off epistemologically or scientifically than the naked eye – that the camera provides views of reality only on the assumption that we normally do, apart from the camera, see reality, i.e., see live persons and real things in actual spaces.” (Cavell 1979a: 192f.)

Cavell’s existential epistemology (see chapter 4) limits the anti-skepticist promise of the camera in saying that it provides “views of reality” and therefore cannot, by implication, present the world in its “virginal purity”. He also emphasises that the camera provides these views of reality “only on the assumption that we normally do, apart from the camera, see reality”. The camera, including the views it produces, is just another part of the reality we are able to perceive, and it provides only more views of reality in addition to our own camera-independent views of reality. It does not provide an epistemologically improved way of world access and is thus not an antidote against skepticism.

Cavell’s parlance draws attention to the insight that the camera’s views of reality are, eventually, viewed by a human spectator (after all, this is what photography and filmmaking were invented for). Hence, even if the camera would provide the desired objective views on the world, these views eventually end up as just another spectatorial object of inescapably epistemologically limited viewers. This, I would add, is another reason why “the camera is no better off epistemologically […] than the naked eye”.

Is there not, then, a contradiction between Cavell’s claim that film is a moving image of skepticism, and the claim that the camera provides views of reality “only on the assumption that we normally do, apart from the camera, see reality”? No, because, firstly, Cavell’s claim can be understood as a model of the way in which skepticism is usually characterised, secondly, these views of reality might still be fundamentally flawed; and, thirdly, as chapter 4 and the subsequent sections of the present chapter spell out in more detail, Cavell relies on a modified conception of skepticism: it is an existential rather than epistemological position.

reflex a fixed reality. There are only impure realities that participate with each other in refractive processes.” (Mullarkey 2009: xvi)

147 See Cavell 1979a: 13 and 16ff.

148 However, Cavell has sometimes mistakenly been described as an advocate of full-fledged film realism. See Rothman and Keane 2000: 23 and 54ff.
The anti-skepticist hopes of classical film theory and Cavell’s dismissal of them provide another point of entry to Cavell’s characterisation of skepticism and the resulting exceptional position of film with regard to skepticism: Rather than presenting the world in its virginal purity, film’s anti-skeptical promises lay bare the desire of human beings to attain an unlimited “view from nowhere” on the world, a standpoint which would ensure them that they know everything they think they know (and everything they need to know, one might add). This desire for a “view from nowhere” is a desire for a detached standpoint from outside, or from the ‘borders’ of the world which would provide a perspective on the world as it ‘really’ is. This detached position can be described as external, objective, and unrestricted – a position which, the skeptic, claims, is unattainable for us.

But if we could attain a view from nowhere, what would our relation to the world be? First, we would be able to ‘see’ the world as a whole, i.e., we would not see only parts of it. We would be faced with the world in its entirety, grasped at one glance. Such a standpoint not only would provide us with an objective, i.e. impartial and detached, view on the world, but also with a complete view, from all possible angles and perspectives. As such observers, we would be present everywhere at the same time. We would be (like) God – or at least in his position.

This means that, in addition to being cut off, detached from the-world-as-it-is because of our insufficient cognitive faculties, we are also too close to the world: We are entangled with it instead of occupying the desired ‘nowhere view’. Human beings, it turns out, are doubly limited: they are too detached from the world (because of the alleged gap between them and the world), and they are too close to the world (because they are unable to attain an encompassing view from nowhere).

For Cavell, the desire for epistemic transcendence is the source of the skepticist problem with our epistemic as well as existential position in the world. The very description of the wish list that comes along with the skeptic’s position, however, already implies its inherent absurdity: If a view from nowhere is what a skeptic wishes for, one could say that only God can occupy such a position.

If the desire cannot be tamed, the only way out seems to be to learn to live with that desire. In the essay “Crossing Paths” Cavell writes, in relation to a discussion of Wittgenstein’s stance toward skepticism, that the

“battle of the human with itself [...] creates the possibility, and necessity, in philosophy, of skepticism. I express this in the first part of The Claim of Reason [...] as the discovery of the absence of criteria for distinguishing the real from the imaginary, Descartes says from dreams, I say also from simulacra (though I did not use the word) [...]. The conclusion I drew from such cases was, unlike all other accounts of Philosophical Investigations that I

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149 This phrase is coined by Thomas Nagel in The View from Nowhere. See Nagel 1986, particularly chapter 5.

150 An echo of this desire can be found in Wittgenstein’s claim in the Tractatus: “Das Subjekt gehört nicht zur Welt, sondern es ist eine Grenze der Welt” (Wittgenstein 1998 [1922]: § 5.632, see also §§ 5.633 and 5.634).

151 Cavell talks about ‘the world as a whole’ in detail in The Claim of Reason (Cavell 1979b: 45).

152 Thus interpreted, the desire for a view from nowhere implies a religious or spiritual reading of skepticism. For the religious roots of modern skepticism in the religious crises that preceded and accompanied the reformation and counter-reformation period in the 16th and 17th century, see the introduction, Popkin 2003 and Perler 2006.

153 The paperback edition cover of Nagel’s The View from Nowhere, which supposedly mirrors the topic of the book, is ironically designed with Romanticist painter Caspar David Friedrich’s landscape painting Das Große Gehege (Ostra-Gehege) bei Dresden (ca. 1832, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden).
knew of then, that Wittgenstein had not in fact or in intention provided a refutation of skepticism but had articulated a source of it. Human language is such that dissatisfaction with it can never be stilled; the question is not so much whether we can live within our finite means [...] as whether we can become responsible for our infinite desires.” (Cavell 2005 [2002]: 366, my emphasis)\textsuperscript{154}

From this perspective, the desire to transcend the limits posed by the human position in the world is a (or even the) source of skepticism, because one of the inevitable consequences of this desire is an eventual dissatisfaction with the limited human position. This is exactly how his Harvard colleague Hilary Putnam summarises Cavell’s interpretation of the skeptic’s position:

“[S]kepticism, as Cavell sees it, is a perpetual dissatisfaction with the human position, a demand for a God’s Eye View or Nothing, that degrades the only perspective that is actually available to us. It is this downgrading of the human position, this aspiration to be outside our own skins (nothing else would be good enough), that Cavell calls ‘skepticism’” (Putnam 1993: viii)

According to Cavell, this dissatisfaction should be taken seriously as another part of the \textit{conditio humana}, which is why he writes in “Crossing Paths” that the real question posed by skepticism is “whether we can become responsible for our infinite desires”. Hence, the proper aim of a philosophical preoccupation with skepticism is not a ‘refutation’ or some other kind of dismissal of skepticism. According to Putnam, Cavell sees

“that the urge to be more than (what we have known as being) human is part of being human. [...] ‘Skepticism’ is inseparable from the emancipatory interest; that is why Cavell has repeatedly said that the war between our skeptical and anti-skeptical impulses cannot and must not have a victor. Cavell’s aim is not to ‘cure’ us of our conflicts but to teach us to live gracefully (and gratefully) with them.” (Putnam 1993: ix)

If the “urge to be more than [human]” and the “dissatisfaction” with the \textit{conditio humana} are indeed part of what constitutes the experience of being human, then arguably they should find also their expression in film and in other cultural enterprises, whether in a philosophically elaborated form or only in a more or less illustrative fashion. Cavell’s Wittgensteinian outline of skepticism thus prompts the very attempt to investigate further the way in which skepticism appears in film.\textsuperscript{155}

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\textsuperscript{154} In that quote, Cavell is concerned predominantly with human dissatisfaction with language. For him, Wittgenstein shows that the “drama" of “human self-dissatisfaction" is “enacted in philosophy’s dissatisfaction with or disappointment with ordinary language" (all quotes in Cavell 2002: 365). The skeptical dissatisfaction with language is also fuelled by the limits of language to express what human beings feel they know about the world: feeling as a form of knowing the world (see, for instance, Sobchack 2007) Here, film might reveal its potential as an anti-skeptical antidote and, like other forms of art, express emotions or insights which have not yet been put into words (or cannot be put into words). The film critic Michael Althen once wrote that in cinema there may be “moments in which the cinema knows more than oneself. And these they are probably not even deep truths, but only a specific glance at outer appearances, or at a constellation of influences which congeal into something we would call present, if we had to.” (Althen 2002: 167, my translation)

\textsuperscript{155} The idea of a cultural manifestation of philosophy is in line with Cavell’s other books and essays, such as \textit{Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare}, where he extends the search for manifestations of skepticism to other arts, most importantly in Shakespeare’s dramas. See Cavell 2003 and Cavell 1988. Josef Früchtl interprets Cavell’s account of skepticism as not so much dissatisfaction with the limits of the \textit{human} condition but with the limits of the modern subject, viz. with modern subjectivity. See Früchtl 2013: chapter 2 and chapter 9. On the role of the modern subject in modern culture and contemporary film see also Früchtl 2004.
Cavell assumes a Kantian stance in arguing that the very limits of our capacity to gain knowledge constitute a *conditio sine qua non* for human experience or knowledge. For Cavell, “the limitations of our knowledge are not failures of it” (Cavell 1979b: 241), as he concludes in his seminal book on skepticism *The Claim of Reason*. Drawing on Kant, Cavell attacks skepticist positions that are based on absolute conceptions of knowledge as “criticizing knowledge against an inhuman idea of knowledge” (Cavell 2004: 128), an idea which is motivated by a craving for generality which in turn abstracts from specific, local forms of knowledge. For Cavell, the limits of the human position in the world are not degrading but the basis for the very possibility of epistemic knowledge, and consequently not “failures” of knowledge.

As outlined in chapter 4.2., Cavell claims that our relation to the world as a whole “is not one of knowing” (Cavell 1979b: 45), but one of *acknowledgment* of our position in the world. In thinking about our position in the world (or about our relation to others), we already acknowledge *that* there is some kind of relation. In this respect, Cavell’s concept of acknowledgement appears inspired by Martin Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-World. The world which gives rise to skeptical doubt is one we are forced to accept in the first place, since it is the world which we are thrown into, which prefigures everything we are able to say or think about it. The world is a Given, it is an existential precondition of our existence as human beings and of everything that follows from it – and therefore cannot be something we ‘know,’ as Cavell puts it in “The Avoidance of Love”: “[S]ince we cannot know that the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing” (Cavell 1976b [1969]: 95).

Josef Früchtl argues that the move from the concept of knowledge to the concept of acknowledgement enables Cavell to reinterpret skepticism, as being not so much an epistemological problem rather than an existential position. Früchtl identifies two forms of the conditions underlying skepticist doubt; a cognitivist one which generalises the insight that knowledge of single entities or events in the world always calls for an epistemological relation between subject and object of knowledge, and a psychological-anthropological one which is an expression of the skeptic’s fear of human finitude (see Früchtl 2013: 200). In the terms outlined in the paragraphs above, the psychological-anthropological form of skepticism is an expression of the idea that the limitations of our knowledge are failures of it.

If we draw the contrast in these terms, the skeptic as seen by Cavell commits a fundamental category error: She transposes the epistemological insight into the limitations of our access to knowledge of the world into an overarching metaphysical position. This metaphysical position of the skeptic is one which “generalises the strict
model of knowledge and declare it as the foundation of all forms of knowledge” (Früchtl 2013: 200, my translation).

This is why “an overcoming of skepticism cannot be a merely theoretical task” (Früchtl 2013: 201, my translation) which aims at showing that knowledge of the world indeed can be representative in single cases. This would be a merely epistemological exercise. Rather, the task is to “expose [skepticism’s] subcutaneous strategies of suppression in a theoretically plural way” (Früchtl 2013: 201, my translation) in order to re-establish a fundamentally reliable correlation between the subject and its world. Put shortly: “Knowledge eventually needs to relegate itself to acknowledgement” (Früchtl 2013: ibid., my translation).

In The Claim of Reason, his extensive study on skepticism, Cavell formulates this basal, pre-argumentative acknowledgement of the world in terms of an aphorism:

“To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it. And if you find that you have fallen in love with the world, then you would be ill-advised to offer an argument of its worth by praising its Design. Because you are bound to fall out of love with your argument, and you may thereupon forget that the world is wonder enough, as it stands. Or not.” (Cavell 1979b: 431).

As Früchtl writes, Cavell’s aphorism suggests that falling in love as a form of acknowledgement is the only adequate answer to the problem posed by the epistemological skepticist, since it turns the screw the other way round: instead of calling for salvation from the epistemological limits of our knowledge of the world, it tells us “to live gracefully (and gratefully) with” the conflicts instilled upon us by skepticism. This call for acknowledgement also grounds Cavell’s film-philosophy, and it is one of the most important traits in which, Früchtl argues, Cavell differs from Gilles Deleuze, the other big philosopher of film of the 1970s and 1980s, because he presents a “philosophy of cinema […] which does not call for salvation” (Früchtl 2013, my translation).

So far, skepticism has been described as a desire for epistemological transcendence which results in an existentially problematic position. Film theory along Bazinian lines interprets this desire as the desire to close a gap between humans and the world, with the (film or photo) camera as a device which, at least psychologically, might be or is able to close that gap.

Another classical film theorist about to be discussed in the next section, Siegfried Kracauer, pursues another explication of the skepticist predicament. It echoes the second limitation inherent in Nagel’s desire for a view from nowhere: human beings are, metaphorically speaking, too close to the world, too immersed in their generalisations and preconceptions, in order to perceive the world as it is. It is film’s realist potential which for Kracauer can provide an antidote.

5.6 Kracauer and the Redemption of Physical Reality

Kracauer is another classical film theorist whose work is inspired by skepticist presuppositions. He revels in what he sees as cinema’s capacities to record rather than
transform reality, as it happens in other arts which are more dependent on the ‘intervention’ of the human hand. Kracauer’s theory of film is an example for a theory which is based on the assumption that human beings are too close to the world in order to allow them to perceive reality unclouded by the limits of their own subjectivity. While in Bazin the camera closes a gap, in Kracauer it lifts a veil of perception.\(^{159}\)

For Kracauer, the photo and film camera are able to record the material world as it is, something which human beings in Western societies do not manage to do. He claims that the “truly decisive reason for the elusiveness of physical reality is the habit of abstract thinking we have acquired under the reign of science and technology” (Kracauer 1960: 299f.). Hence, our very capacity for conceptual thinking alienates us from the world we live in, since concepts by their very nature are abstractions. Kracauer follows a long philosophical tradition according to which the concepts we use also influence the way we experience and perceive the world.\(^{160}\) He is specifically concerned about western societies’ indulgence in abstraction, which he contrasts with an attention to details, an urge for concretion (Kracauer 1960: 296f.).

As a consequence of this “indulgence in abstraction,” things in physical reality are no more taken by us for what they are, nor do they derive their value from what they intrinsically are.\(^{161}\) Rather, they become implemented into a larger context and thereby become a means for a different end. Kracauer’s description of artists’ use of elements from reality mirrors this indulgence:

“To the extent that painting, literature, the theater, etc., involve nature at all, they do not really represent it. Rather, they use it as raw material from which to build works which lay claim to autonomy. In the work of art nothing remains of the raw material itself, or, to be precise, all that remains of it is so molded that it implements the intentions conveyed through it. In a sense, the real-life material disappears in the artist’s intentions. [...] The significance of a work of art determines that of its elements; or conversely, its elements are significant in so far as they contribute to the truth or beauty inherent in the work as a whole. Their function is not to reflect reality but bear out a vision of it.” (Kracauer 1960: 300f., my emphasis)

In short: An artist “overwhelms rather than records reality” (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 300). For Kracauer, it is the very “opportunity reserved for the cinematic medium” (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 301) to record and represent reality as it is, without being transformed by whatever artistic intentions or concepts. Cinema’s ability to give us reality in the raw is what, in Kracauer’s view, really makes it special and distinguishes it from other means of grasping reality. This is how he ends up with his prescriptive realist theory of cinema.

But, one might object, the film camera bears out a vision of reality as well – in particular since many filmmakers have artistic aspirations. Kracauer, however, does not

\(^{159}\) Here, Kracauer’s theory of film can be read as a rebuttal of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy, and as an allusion to Schopenhauer’s proverbial celebration of the Maya, the “Schleier des Trugs” (Schopenhauer 1988 [1859]: §3).

\(^{160}\) Compare Plato’s theory of forms or Kant’s transcendental idealism. According to the latter experiences are co-constituted by the concepts we employ to understand them. See the Vorrede in Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant 1998 [1787]).

\(^{161}\) Some passages in Bazin also celebrate the photograph’s “impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15). However, Kracauer talks more explicitly about the exaggerated proximity of humans to their world, as noted above.
appreciate films that aspire to be art in the classical sense due to the way in which they distort representations of reality:

“Art in film is reactionary because it symbolizes wholeness and thus pretends to the continued existence of beliefs which ‘cover’ physical reality in both senses of the word. The result are films which sustain the prevailing abstractness”. (Siegfried Kracauer 1960: 301)

Kracauer does not exclude the possibility of ‘film as art’, but claims that an artistic film would be “art with a difference”:

“All this does not imply that camera-realism and art exclude each other. But if films which really show what they picture are art, they are art with a difference. Indeed, along with photography, film is the only art which exhibits its raw material” (Kracauer 1960: 302).

It is the very ability to get to the core of reality, to “exhibit” the material world in the raw, which makes cinema special, and an art with a difference, in Kracauer’s view. Cinema is Kracauer’s antidote to the intimate detachment from the world he finds in his fellow human beings. His conception has many elements already known from skepticist theories: human beings are placed in a position remote from the world as it ‘really’ is; the tendency to think about and experience the world via abstract conceptions impedes the perception of things in the world as they are; it impedes the human perceiver from distancing herself from the world in order to perceive it ‘as it is’. The way human beings perceive and experience things throws a veil over things as they really are, or blurs, or otherwise distorts, human access to them. The remedy to this are the film camera and, to a lesser extent, the photo camera. These two devices come way closer to reality than humans ever could.

Peculiarly, in Kracauer’s account the world, as it is, is so close, so very much within our reach, that we are unable to grasp it – and thereby he mirrors Nagel’s general philosophical position described in the earlier passages of this paper:

“In recording and exploring physical reality, film exposes to view a world never seen before, a world as elusive as Poe’s purloined letter, which cannot be found because it is within everybody’s reach. What is meant here is of course not any of those extensions of the everyday world which are being annexed by science but our ordinary physical environment itself. Strange as it may seem, although streets, faces, railway stations, etc., lie before our eyes, they have remained largely invisible so far.” (Kracauer 1960: 299)
5.7 The Skeptic and ‘the’ Camera

Kracauer’s account resonates with Bazin’s and Cavell’s assumptions that the photo camera is an instrument that mechanically, or automatically, records reality viz. is a recording of reality.164 With Béla Balázs, Kracauer shares the conviction that cinema is able to redeem to us the capability to rediscover the details which can be found in the world.165 These positions retrace the dualism outlined in the earlier sections of the chapter: On the one side there is the world in its so-called virginal purity, on the other side there are humans whose world view is hopelessly contaminated by their perceptual apparatus or by the concepts they use. They are thus incapable of perceiving the world as it is. Enter the camera, which allegedly has the potential to function as a bridge which crosses the epistemological divide between humankind and the world, or as a device which lifts the “veil” which bars a proper perspective on the world.

While Bazin’s description of the camera’s psychological appeal emphasises the imperfection, and thus fundamental insufficiency, of man’s cognitive faculties, for Kracauer man is not necessarily separated from the world but rather is so due to his own fault: because of his indulgence in abstractions. Kracauer emphasises the camera’s ability to reveal small details of everyday life on screen; things which inhabitants of the urban world might never even notice in actual everyday life, such as a specific expression on a face or the uniqueness of an ordinary street (see Kracauer 1960: 303). For Kracauer, this ability is cinema’s great contribution to modern life. However, it is an insight which he transforms into an overly prescriptive realist theory of film. It is ironic that someone who starts with a certain anti-theoretical, or at least anti-conceptualistic, impetus ends up being one of the patrons of yet another suffix theory with an “-ism,” film realism.

The artist as described by Bazin as well as the Cavellian skeptic share the same desires: They want to gain access to the world as it is, unrestricted by what Bazin calls human’s “inescapable subjectivity”. They want to transcend the limits of the human perspective, gain an external, unlimited standpoint, a detached view on the world which for skeptics is inaccessible.166 In Bazin’s ‘psychological account,’ film and photo cameras are means for making human beings believe that they can overcome and bridge the gap that prevents them from having direct access to the world. Conceiving of the camera in this way, it functions as a replacement (Stellvertreter) which enables human beings to

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165 See Balázs 2001 [1924]: 16ff. See also the chapter “The Face of Man” Balázs’ Theory of the Film (Balázs 1970 [1949]: 60-88.
166 Even though one should be cautious in ascribing this desire to Bazin himself, his use of words over and over again implies that he is certainly drawn to the temptations of skeptical desires. See the following quote from “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” already discussed earlier: “The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in is power to lay bare the realities. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can know, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist.” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15, my emphasis).

I confine myself here to point out the implicitly skeptical tone of Bazin’s formulations, such as “lay bare the realities,” “objective world,” “impassive lens,” “striping its objects of all those ways of seeing it,” “that which means: revealing the way of seeing it”), “preconceptions,” “spiritual dust and grime,” eyes that cover the objects with this spiritual dust and grime (here ‘to cover’ seems to mean: to separate oneself off from the world), longing for “virginal purity”. He also talks of “a world that we neither know nor can know”. Bazin’s use of metaphors exemplifies Edward Branigan’s point that the language games played in a particular film theory determine its perspective on film, and its emphasis on the elements of film it finds most important. See Branigan 2006: 221ff.
gain the desired all-encompassing view of the world (as it really is; as a whole). In this respect, the camera is able to ‘do’ what human beings are not, because it is not restrained by the inescapable subjectivity of human beings: No painter’s hand interferes in the process of mechanical reproduction of the world. In Kracauer’s account, the position of human beings in the world is slightly varied: we are not able to see the world as it is because the abstract concepts we use to access the world (and think about it) impede us from seeing the world and all its small details as it is.

As tempting as these notions and metaphors may appear, the belief that the camera can—in the best case—give us an access to that otherwise inaccessible view from nowhere is misguided for a couple of reasons. First, even a camera is still subjected to conditions of recording: think only of the selective influences of framing, film stock, lighting as well as the challenges of film sound (diegetic sound vs. non-diegetic sound, cocktail party effect, the dependency of film sound on the frequency range of microphones, etc.). They all influence the audiovisual perspective of the camera on the world. Thus, even a camera distorts, selects, shapes, or frames views on reality. Second, whatever has been recorded by a (film) camera must be reinterpreted by their spectators. Even if the audiovisual means of recording reality would reveal the world ‘as it is,’ without an interpreter they would be on the same side of the divide between the world as it is and its human spectators. Put differently, even if a camera is able to occupy the skeptic’s desired external standpoint, we would in the end be faced again with the same ‘limited’ human interpretations of the world, or of reality as before. In sum: even if we accept the skeptic’s terms, the camera does not provide us with a view from nowhere.

5.8 Insufficiency vs. Incompleteness

The theories discussed in this chapter operate within a binary structure: Either cinematic technology functions as a bridging device or it does not. My main objection against the assumption of the film camera as a bridging device was that it still does not meet the most fundamental skepticist worry that the human condition is insufficient for the acquisition of knowledge. In Cavell, Putnam and Früchtl, we saw that a possible way of meeting skepticist worries consists in interpreting them as the outcome of an existential rather than epistemological position and that the appropriate move is to ‘tame’ the skepticist desire instead of attempting to refute it—thereby acknowledging it.

Even though Cavell’s existential position proposes to live with the idea of imperfect knowledge, the fundamental skepticist claim against the inescapable subjectivity of the human condition remains. This comes down to the position that whatever data humans

167 The early Heidegger would say: The camera is not a being-in-the-world, or Dasein, but something which is ready-to-hand: a Zuhandenes. From a Heideggerian point of view the camera is not in the world because to “be” in the world presupposes that one is a sentient being conscious of one’s own existence.

168 In personal correspondence, Josef Früchtl suggested a play with words: Even though the camera does not provide a view from nowhere, it provides a view from now-here and thereby provides a snapshot of how the recorded portion of the world was at the exact moment the photograph (or film scene) was taken (the camera is thus a kind of indexical expression-machine). Leaving aside problems caused by the possibility of manipulating exposure duration, lens aperture and other parameters, this is in fact a viable reductio ad absurdum against the skeptic: The camera’s ability to ‘capture the fleeting moment’ thus (literally) exposes the skeptic to the limitations of a view from nowhere, because it would not provide a view from now and here, a specific glimpse at states and events of the world, which can arguably be regarded as just as valuable as an all-encompassing viewpoint.
acquire about the world is subjected to the inescapable subjectivity of human world access. As a consequence, even the most accurate cinematic recording device would still be subjected to the skepticist worry, because even an automatic (cinematic) recording of the world needs to be interpreted by humans.

The possibility of doubt in every single case of alleged knowledge, however, does not logically allow the inference that all of our knowledge of the world is fallible. A generalised inadequacy assumption about human vision is unintelligible if one adopts a Wittgensteinian line of argument, as Malcolm Turvey points out:

“General, systematic doubt within the context of sight is equally as unintelligible as in other contexts. Doubting and testing what we see is only intelligible against a background of certainties that are taken for granted, such as the existence of our eyes. And it is only because of the logical possibility of being certain of what we see that, when we have grounds for doing so, it makes sense to doubt it.” (Turvey 2008: 112).

In On Certainty, Wittgenstein repeatedly argues from different angles that doubt is intelligible only within pre-accepted belief system and that a “doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt.” (Wittgenstein 1984: §450) Wittgenstein claims that doubt makes sense only within the accepted rules of a specific language game: “[T]he questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.” (Wittgenstein 1984: §341, see also ibid.: §317) In other words, Wittgenstein expresses a contextualist theory of knowledge (or certainty): “Our knowledge forms an enormous system. And only within this system has a particular bit the value we give it.” (Wittgenstein 1984: §410) Hence, in his notes Wittgenstein tries to outline a contextualist position within which he reflects on the meaning and mutual relation of epistemological concepts such as “doubt,” “certainty,” “belief,” or “knowledge”. Since for Wittgenstein all variants of doubt only make sense on the basis of a „Boden meiner Überzeugungen“ (§ 248), this basis cannot deliver arguments for skeptics who are convinced that human knowledge is deficient. Wittgenstein’s epistemology is thus, along with Kant’s transcendental philosophy, an important basis for Cavell’s claim that “the limitations of our knowledge are not failures of it”.

But what happens if the insufficiency assumption is replaced by an incompleteness assumption? That is, if what is at stake is not the inadequacy of the human condition – which implies that we can never be certain that whatever we think we know about the world is based on reliable information – but rather the worry that the human senses will never give us enough information about the world we live in? According to such a position, our assumptions about the world are quantitatively deficient, not qualitatively.\(^\text{172}\)

\(^{169}\) German original text: “Ein Zweifel, der an allem zweifelte, wäre kein Zweifel.” All translations in this paragraph from Wittgenstein 1969-1975.

\(^{170}\) German original text: “die Fragen, die wir stellen, und unsere Zweifel beruhen darauf, daß gewisse Sätze vom Zweifel ausgenommen sind, gleichsam die Angeln, in welchen jene sich bewegen.”

\(^{171}\) German original text: “Unser Wissen bildet ein großes System. Und nur in diesem System hat das Einzelne den Wert, den wir ihm beilegen.”

\(^{172}\) These are the conditions under which the so-called Gettier debate in analytic philosophy has been discussed. In 1963, the philosopher Edmund L. Gettier undermined the then common understanding that knowledge can be defined as “justified true belief” (see Gettier 1963).
Under such assumptions the role of the camera changes: It no longer replaces the allegedly inadequate human senses but extends or supplements them, and thereby narrows the alleged gap between humans and the world (instead of simply closing it).\textsuperscript{173} And indeed, this provides an accurate common sense description of the way in which (moving) image technology historically has enriched human knowledge and multiplied the number of imaginable perspectives on the world.

But, as Turvey points out, it is easy at this point to confuse two revelatory potentiae of the cinematic. He argues that it is misleading to compare cinema to revelatory visual technologies such as microscopes or telescopes in general (see Turvey 2008: 116f.): Films do not “reveal truths about reality” (Turvey 2008: 117) in the scientific sense, i.e. it is not the revelation of natural phenomena which are indiscernible for the ordinary human senses which distinguish the medium from other ways of representation. Classical film theorists such as Epstein, Kracauer and Balázs (who are the prime focus of study of Turvey’s study \textit{Doubting Vision}) failed to clearly distinguish the film camera’s ability to extend (or refine) ordinary human vision from the latter’s replacement with visual tools in the microscopic or macroscopic range. As a mere extension, film shows what, in principle, is accessible to the human eye. While Turvey is basically right, he neglects the fact that scientific imagery and film have never been two totally separated areas. Experimental films or more unorthodox fiction films have always explored the narrato-aesthetic potential of ‘scientific’ imaging devices.

The first experiments with the technology of the moving image indeed did not result from a concern to tell stories in a new way, but rather in order to solve specific technological challenges which made possible new scientific discoveries: Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833), credited with the production of the first permanent photograph in 1825, was an inventor (who also invented a combustion engine); Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) and Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904), who established early practical applications of tracing motion via photography (see figures 5.1. and 5.2), were inventors and scientists without an explicit interest in the artistic potential of their medium, but the devices they invented for their focus of research were later picked up by filmmakers for narrative as well as aesthetic purposes.\textsuperscript{174}

\textsuperscript{173} Malcolm Turvey adapts this position and claims, following a broadly Wittgensteinian line of reasoning, that “the cinema [...] augments our already existing capacity to find out about the environment around us using our eyes.” (Turvey 2008: 113) The augmentation position builds on the presumption that incompleteness is not inadequacy.\textsuperscript{174} The most succinct study of the cinematic relevance of pre-cinematic explorations of time is Mary Ann Doane’s influential study \textit{The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive} (Doane 2002).
The epistemological usefulness of imaging technologies is obvious in their omnipresence in medical and natural-scientific research, in the significance of x-rays, CAT scans or MRT scans for medical diagnoses, in the role of thermal imaging for the detection of infected passengers at airports during the SARS epidemic or for analysing the chemical constitution of far-away stars in astronomic research, in the effectiveness of super slow-motion shots for systematically analysing animal motion, assessing the impact of a bullet passing through an apple or identifying the effects of frontal crashes on the front area of automobiles. Imaging technology, often data-enhanced, plays a significant role in understanding and shaping the world as it is today.

The omnipresence of such means of visualisation reveals how natural such ‘views’ on the world, such ‘extensions’ of the human senses (McLuhan), have become in popular discourse. By means of uncovering a more complex and detailed picture of the world, these media actually contribute to diminishing the “gap” between humans and the world hoped for by classical film theorists, even though they do not necessarily close that gap but rather add more nuanced perspectives on the world.

This double extension is part of a long-standing tradition in experimental filmmaking, starting with Marey’s “pre-cinematic” experiments in chronophotography and Muybridge’s stop-action photographs. Silent filmmakers experimented with the epistemological potential of the film camera, e.g. by exploring the rhythms and almost geometrical structures of urban cityscapes in MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA (Vertov, 1929) or BERLIN – DIE SYMPHONIE DER GROßSTADT (Ruttmann, 1927), or by systematically discovering the expressive potential of montage (Kuleshov’s montage experiments). This tradition continues until now, as shown, for instance, by Godfrey Reggio’s QATSI trilogy (KOAANISQATSI: LIFE OUT OF BALANCE (1982), POWAQATS: LIFE IN TRANSFORMATION (1988), NAQOYQATS: LIFE AS WAR (2002)). Reggio’s films use extreme time lapse and slow motion cinematography as well as other expressive cinematic techniques in order to expose the radical transformation of natural landscapes into increasingly technologized and industrialised environments.

The most elaborated experimental film project on the epistemological and expressive potential of the medium of film is perhaps Gustav Deutsch’ 12-part film essay FILM IST (part 1-6: 1998, part 7-12: 2002). The first six parts celebrate the scientific laboratory “as the first birth place of cinematography” (Deutsch). In film chapters such as “movement and time,” “light and darkness” or “an instrument,” whose titles continue the open sentence “film is...,” Deutsch systematically shows how the use of cinematographic techniques enriches the aesthetic repertoire as well as the visual means of exploring the world. In particular, the use of time lapse and slow motion, extreme close-ups and panorama shots, the systematic tracking of objects and living beings in motion, the invention of visual recording mechanisms such as x-rays or inverted colour spectrums all have added to the inventory of possible human perspectives on the world.

From an epistemological perspective, however, the fact that cinematic media are crucial for contemporary knowledge gain does not signify that they actually increase or

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175 Parts 7 to 12 present a systematic inventory of commonly used aesthetic devices and themes of narrative fiction films. Other experimental filmmakers also systematically explore the narrative and aesthetic tradition or creative possibilities of film, e.g. KRISTALL (Girardet and Müller, 2006) or the various works of Bruce Conner, Bill Morrison or Douglas Gordon, such as 24 HOUR PSYCHO (Gordon, 1993).
improve our knowledge of the world. Instead, from a skepticist position that embraces the insufficiency assumption the Cavellian objection still applies: these means of gaining knowledge are “no better off epistemologically” than the naked eye because eventually the data produced by them still need to be evaluated by humans. If one subscribes to the position – rejected by Cavell – that the “inescapable” human subjectivity is a flaw or fundamental restriction for all attempts to gain knowledge, then no way of enhancing mediatic access to the world is enough (as long as one does not develop a Nietzschean-inspired “transhumanistic” vision in which humans in the flesh are replaced by machinic humans which are unhampered by the flaws of the organic human body\(^{176}\)).

5.9 Skepticism and the Lebenswelt

The world, cinematically represented, is a world which, qua suspension of disbelief, I am tempted to believe to know, but it is also a world which I do not have direct access to. During a screening, the world of the film is literally passing before the audience’s eyes and ears, and even though the world of the film has been shot and assembled in the past, during a screening it has the character of an “eternal present” (Shaviro: 67), a sense of perpetual now-here. The perceived world of the film is that world, because it is constituted through the very process of being perceived, with no external counterpart to match it exactly. It does not make sense to inquire about the ‘real world’ that lies behind or is the ground of the world of the film. Each film creates a world of its own, even though it consists of building blocks taken from the supposedly ‘real’ world.

There are thus limits to the notion of film as a moving image of skepticism because the world of the film is, ontologically speaking, always already a projected reality. Films aspire to a certain degree of credibility in rendering the worlds they present as being conceivable and verisimilar (to the world as we know it). At the least they try to establish a conceivable ontology in which, for instance, travels through time and space are not experienced as being self-contradictory or otherwise implausible. But it does not make sense to question the reality of the film or film world/diegesis itself (the “fact of film,” if you will), because the world of the film is constituted through the act of experiencing it. In contrast, the world “as it is” is not constituted through the act of experiencing it – only “my” world, the world as I experience it, is constituted in that way. The only similarity between our access to film and our access to the world as imagined by the skeptic is that in experiencing both we do not entirely experience the world as it is “out there,” outside of ourselves.

It is important to keep in mind that the skeptic’s world-as-it-is is a world devoid of human presence, a world whose properties are not co-shaped by human actions. This is the only way of consistently claiming a gap between man and world. But this underestimates that the world we live in is a Lebenswelt, a world which is not simply a given but shaped, formed, moulded, inhabited by human beings. In Heideggerian terms: the world we share is not simply vorhanden (present-at-hand) but zugänglich (ready-to-hand); it is a world which is formed through our human interventions.

This ready-to-handness becomes even more evident in current digital culture with its omnipresence of mediated images, touchscreen user interfaces and virtual

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communication. E.g., one cannot describe Manhattan’s Times Square without recourse to its character as a Lebenswelt, at least unless one conforms to extreme solipsistic positions according to which everything we experience is a mere illusion. The emergence of digital media in the past thirty years presents a profound adaptive challenge to the older, ‘analog’ world view. Not only does an ontology of digital film differ at least in nuances from an ontology of analog film; the emergence of digital media also introduces a different relation between the digital image and sound track and their addressees: Recipients increasingly become users who interact with their object of consumption.

In playing computer games, players participate in and co-create the world of the game, even though within the confines of pre-established boundaries of the game design. Films on DVD or Blu-ray allow a much higher degree of spectatorial freedom in comparison to movie theatre screenings: One can freely jump between scenes; audio commentaries, behind-the-scenes featurettes, or alternative endings influence film interpretation. Even though some of these new features are merely optional or evolutionary developments that basically already existed in the video film era, the switch from consumption to interaction seems to be a categorical rather than gradual one.

The concluding chapter sections consequently examine the idea of film as a moving image of skepticism under the conditions of digital media by focusing on their ontological implications and the possibility of interaction. The questions raised by digital media, I argue, pose new challenges which cannot automatically be answered in traditional terminology. Even if the concepts of traditional philosophy are apt for describing, analysing and understanding the changes brought forward by the emergence of the digital, they must be applied to the current state of the world.

5.10 Cavell Digitalised: Animated Film Characters and Digital Film

Cavell’s philosophy of film, while essentially being a philosophy of the ontological implications of the experience and memory of films, is intricately tailored to the philosophical challenges posed by analog filmmaking. His ontological reflections revolve around the peculiar indexical relation between the world and its audiovisual traces on celluloid. But how does his designation of film as a “moving image of skepticism” survive under the conditions of 21st-century digital cinema? At every stage of the production process, current digital filmmaking profoundly changes the way in which film are produced, marketed and screened to audiences. Most significant for the topic of this chapter is the fact that – in comparison to analog film – digital image capture changes the ontological correlation between the image and its (digitally) captured objects. Cavell never explicitly addresses this issue – in The World Viewed he is not able to, since the second edition was published in 1979, nor in his other writings on film. However, in the section “More of The World Viewed” (Cavell 1979a: 162-230) he

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177 For a filmmaker’s practical account of digital filmmaking, see Mike Figgis’ Digital Film-making (Figgis 2006). Giovanna Fossati intelligently discusses the transitional processes from analog to digital film by bypassing the binary distinction of the analog and the digital in the introduction and first chapter of From Grain to Pixel (Fossati 2009). Henry Jenkins explores the areas where both media constellations mingle in terms of media convergence. See Jenkins 2003 and Jenkins 2006. See also chapter 3.6.

178 Exceptions are his 1988 essay “The Advent of Videos” (Cavell 2005 [1988]) and the 1982 article “The Fact of Television” (Cavell 2005 [1982]). Both explore how the experience of movies changes in the turn away from the cinema as the prime locus of film experience to the mass-distribution of them via television and video access.
discusses objections launched by film scholar Alexander Sesonske against the claim that the “material basis of the media of movies” consists in “a succession of automatic world projections” (Cavell 1979a: 167). Cavell’s definition, as he himself acknowledges, understands movies as “projections of the real world” (Cavell 1979a: 167). As Sesonske points out, this seems to exclude a popular genre of cinema: animated cartoons. The Cavell-Sesonske discussion on this issue offers a shop window for a ‘digital version’ of Cavell’s ontology of film, since animated cartoons share a number of features with digital cinema. Animated cartoons do not originate in a photography-shooting procedure on a set, and at least in digital blockbuster cinema a considerable portion of the screened material it generated with the help of computer-generated imagery (CGI).

Here is Sesonske’s argument against Cavell’s position: The world and characters of these films “never existed until they were projected on the screen.” (Quoted in Cavell 1979a: 167) Therefore, the projected world of an animated cartoon exists only “now, at the moment of projection” (quoted in Cavell 1979b: 168) and thus differs profoundly from (the experience of) the projected world of a real-footage film: “There is a world we experience here, but not the world – a world I know and see but to which I am nevertheless not present, yet not a world past.” (Quoted in Cavell 1979a: 168, original emphasis)

For Cavell, animated cartoons are indeed not “successions of automatic world projections”. Instead, he defines them as “successions of animated world projections” (Cavell 1979a: 13), thereby distancing himself from automatism as a defining concept of his film ontology, and at length outlines features that distinguish them from live-action films: Cartoon characters are “anthropomorphic […] in everything but form” and therefore “animistic” (Cavell 1979a: 169), they are “animations, disembodiments, pure spirits,” they “abrogate […] corporeality” (Cavell 1979a: 170).

The main reason for Cavell’s position is that for him the audience’s temporal absence from the world projected on screen is the most fundamental aspect of what makes films special (see also Cavell 1979a: 155). He is fascinated by the movies’ ability to make present (in both senses of the word) a world which has, in whatever form, existed in the past. The world of a real-footage film is not entirely invented, it draws on, re-combines and elevates into a different ontological dimension actual elements of the world. His use of the word “automatic” in “successions of automatic world projections” is supposed to register this difference: Because the material basis of movies (channelled through the film camera) is a succession of automatic world projections, they project the world in a completely different fashion than other forms of art such as painting. And animated cartoons are projections of a world rather than of the world, and in this respect closer to painting than to photography-based media.

179 Cavell himself seems unsure whether to accept the criticism and consequently reformulate his definition, or whether he should reject it and define animated cartoons as something other than movies (“cartoons are not movies” [Cavell 1979a: 168]), or to even interpret his own definition differently in order to include animated cartoons. Cavell’s (actual or only pretended) hesitation is apparent in his repetitious use of relativising phrases such as “what I said about movies, if it is true” (Cavell 1979a: 168), “I do, apparently, have to show that cartoons are not movies” (Cavell 1979a: 168). Cavell’s hesitance, I suspect, is strategic: Echoing Popper, he insists on not being able to prove that cartoons are not movies. Cavell thinks that he “does not have to show that cartoons are movies because [someone with such a position] has no theory which his taste contradicts” (Cavell 1979a: 168).

180 On the difference between temporal and ontological absence, see section 5.2 of this chapter.
Cavell does not assume a definite position on the definitional status of animated cartoons, but he is also not too concerned about this failure, because, firstly, he is not interested in a comprehensive, i.e. essentialist definition of the medium of movies. As he remarks elsewhere, “the answer [to the question ‘what is the essence of movies?’] seems to me more or less empty” (see Cavell 1979a: 165). Secondly, he is rather interested in the “role reality plays in this art” (Cavell 1979a: 165) – and for Cavell it is intricately connected to the experience of movies rather than to their ontological constitution: Experiencing movies is the experience of a world past. Movies allow directly experiencing, here and now, a world which is already (long) gone. This is what no other art delivers (except from subsets of audiovisual technology such as photography and radio). This is why Cavell is inclined unfavourably against animated cartoons.

But if reality plays such an important role for Cavell’s understanding of film, present-day (blockbuster) cinema presents an enormous challenge for him. The distinction between real footage and animated footage does not even make sense anymore for a large portion of contemporary popular cinema: Digital technology has advanced to such an extent that for spectators it is often not even possible to distinguish actual on-set footage from the additions and transformations implemented by the visual-effects department in post-production. This does not apply so much to motion-captured film characters like Gollum in THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (Peter Jackson, 2001), or Jar-Jar Binks in STAR WARS – EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE (Lucas, 1999), who can be subjected to Cavell’s claim that animated characters are “animistic” and “abrogate[e] […] corporeality”. It is rather the fact of digital cinema as a whole that presents problems for Cavell’s position, since digital animation plays such an integral role in this kind of cinema. More fundamentally even: Digital cinema has loosened its alleged indexical relation with the world it films and projects.

Actually, the boundaries between real-footage film and animated film have never been absolute, as the extensive use of visual effects in Méliès’ early films shows. Also, more recent non-digital films also deliberately cross the boundaries between real-footage and animation. Two such examples are WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT (Zemeckis, 1988), in which cartoon characters and real actors share their film world (see figure 5.4), and the fairy tale mash-up ENCHANTED (Lima, 2007) (see figure 5.3).

The latter film is based on the idea that animated fairy-tale cartoon characters are thrown into real-life Manhattan (where they assume the form of real characters, played by actors in the flesh, such as Amy Adams, Susan Sarandon and Timothy Spall). ENCHANTED switches between animated cartoon scenes and real-life scenes (see figures 5.5 and 5.6) – but the film never juxtaposes them in the way WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT does. For these examples, Cavell would perhaps say that these films are partly movies, partly not. But WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT already points to the problem presented by digital filmmaking: The very attempt to distinguish real-footage films from digitally animated films loses meaning because both elements of filmmaking are so inextricably intertwined.
The question, then, for the concluding discussion is: How does digital cinema change the ontology of film, and consequently, the assessment of Cavell’s definitional attempts of the “material basis of the movies”?

The ideal starting point for this discussion is David N. Rodowick’s *The Virtual Life of Film*. Despite being a book on the fate of (analog) film theory in the age of the digital computation of the (cinematic) image, it is to a large extent also a meditation on Cavell’s *The World Viewed*. For Rodowick, a committed cinéphile, the vanishing of the celluloid film strip entails a radical shift in the character of film: In digital cinema, the indexical photographic image is replaced by “a computational simulation that enables new forms and modalities of creative activity” (Rodowick 2007a: 184).

In Rodowick’s account, digital images are not so much recorded as computated, since whatever the lenses of digital camera capture is immediately “transcod[ed]” (Rodowick 2007a: 117) with the help of algorithms into computational language. This code must be recalculated or retranslated into an output form perceivable by human agents. Consequently, there is no direct, continuous correlation between the image output and its generating input:

> “Where analogical transcriptions record traces of events as continuities in time, digital capture and synthesis produce tokens of numbers through a process of calculation – a symbolic expression – of what humans would call a ‘perception’.” (Rodowick 2007a: 112)

Rodowick invokes the philosopher Roger Scruton in suggesting that “what fades in film is the historical dimension of photographic causality” (Rodowick 2007a: 86), while digital images are more and more becoming “the art of synthesizing imaginary worlds” (Rodowick 2007a: 87). This is particularly so because, as a result of computation, real-world input captured by a lens is, for the computer, ontologically on a par with animated
or graphic material; all of them are simply present in transcoded form. Computers do not distinguish between the encoded information of digital film cameras and the encoded information of computer-generated imagery. Cinema in the digital age is less indebted to indexicality and therefore “less anchored to the prior existence of things and people” (Rodowick 2007a: 86), and consequently also more open to imaginative experiments. In other words: Méliès trumps Lumière.

The emergence of the digital has a profound effect on our ontological concepts; Rodowick calls the result “transcoded ontologies” (Rodowick 2007a: 174), since the intrusion of digital screens and images into our everyday lives also affects our relation as human beings to the world (our Lebenswelt) in general. Being the result of a process of computation, the digital image does not presuppose a pre-existing physical reality it can be a transcription (or index) of.181

Digital technology has also become an indispensable element of our contemporary everyday lives. ‘Analog’ manual activities are more and more replaced by ‘digital’ manual activities: touching surfaces, swiping, typing, browsing, etc. Our interaction with a world of spatial depth (a world of manual labour) becomes interaction with computated surfaces (a world of touchscreen surfaces). Filmmakers now can even change the trajectory of the camera’s movement through film space years after the actual on-location shootings of the actors’ performances.182

Why does the adaptation of the digital to the inventory of our world so radically change our ontologies? Referring to Kracauer, Rodowick writes that

“the material content of physical reality is not simply nature but rather what phenomenology calls the Lebenswelt: the global accumulation of the events, actions, activities, and contingencies of everyday life, an asubjective world overwhelming individual perception and consciousness.” (Rodowick 2007a: 77)

This ontological relevance of the Lebenswelt allows Rodowick to ask “how our ontology has changed in our interactions with computer screens. What epistemological and ethical relations to the world and to collective life do simulation automatisms presuppose?” (Rodowick 2007a: 174)

Rodowick’s “guess at the riddle” is a “retreat from the sensuous exploration of the physical world and the material structure of everyday life to probe imaginative life and a new kind of sociality” (Rodowick 2007a: 174) which explores “new relations with space and with time […] that involve expectations of interactivity and control.” (Rodowick 2007a: 175) The notion of a new kind of sociality is, of course, familiar to those who increasingly rely on social media and social networks such as Skype, Facebook and Twitter for communicating with family, friends and colleagues. Such new forms of communication facilitate temporally and spatially asymmetric conversations all around

181 Tom Gunning also does not give up on digital indexicality, claiming that “storage in terms of numerical data does not eliminate indexicality.” (Gunning 2004: 40) But Frank Kessler notes, appropriately, that “one should be careful not to glide from stating the object’s ‘having been there’ to the more global assertion that the image depicts ‘how it was’” (Kessler 2010: 191).

182 James Cameron and his team pioneered this approach by developing a Simul-Cam for AVATAR. A Simul-Cam is basically a monitor which fusions real-time shots with the virtual environment produced by the CGI department, while allowing the director to freely move through that film space. However, even though increasingly based on digital devices, almost all of the digital effects of a film are in pre-production based on hand-drawings or digital transformations of actual textures. The clothing of digital characters, for instance, is most likely based on actual clothes produced by the costume department. See the behind-the-scenes materials on the Extended editions of the LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy.
the world. Digital means of communication allow for a higher degree of interactivity and control.

For Rodowick, film’s “overcoming of skepticism relied on a perception of the shared duration of people and things as expressed in the condition of analogy, a condition wherein space functions as the conveyer of duration rather than representation,” (Rodowick 2007a: 179).

Thereby, according to Rodowick, film overcame skepticism, because – unlike painting or other arts – film automatically records the duration of events in the world and does not merely render a re-presentation of it. The fact of film reassures us of the existential fact that there is a spatiotemporal world, and it allows us to explore and reflect on this world without being directly immersed in it.

Digital screen technology still allows reflecting on a projected world – but the ontological intimacy of the digital with the world it is a projection of is weaker than in analog cinema. Digital cinema does not assure us of the prior existence of the projected world as strongly as older analog media do. Therefore Rodowick claims that digital screen technology “is not an overcoming of skepticism, but a different expression of it” (Rodowick 2007a: 175). The digital era reformulates the problem of skepticism: The problem of the accuracy of filmic representations of reality becomes less important in an era of increasing interaction between, on the one hand, spectators or users and, on the other, increasingly interactive media products. In interactive media, the problem of other minds gains significance and postpones the alleged skepticist problem of knowledge of the world. In a society governed by constant indirect computated interaction there can be no final reassurance about the identity of (or behind) the interfaces we interact with. In that way, digitality paves the way to a sort of pragmatic “acceptance of skepticism” that updates Cavell’s claim:

“In the world of computers and the Internet, we have little doubt about the presence of other minds and, perhaps, other worlds. And we believe, justifiably or not, [...] in our ability to control, manage or communicate with other minds and worlds, but at a price: matter and minds have become ‘information’. In this sense, the cultural dominance of the digital may indicate a philosophical retreat from the problem of skepticism to an acceptance of skepticism. For in the highly mutable communities forged by computer-mediated communications, the desire to know the world has lost its provocation and its uncertainty. Rather, one seeks new ways of acknowledging other minds, without knowing whether other selves are behind them.” (Rodowick 2007a: 175, my emphasis)

Where before knowledge was, metaphorically speaking, in the possession of the world we insufficiently tried to grasp, it is now computer technology which is the keeper of the kind of knowledge the skeptic yearns for:

“Our disappointment in failing ever to know the world or others now becomes the perpetual disappointment of failing to attain the more nearly perfect (future) knowledge of computers and computer communications, whose technological evolution always seems to run ahead of the perceptual and cognitive capacity to manipulate them for our own ends. It is the failure to arrive at what always comes ahead.” (Rodowick 2007a: 176)
Rodowick suggests that, as the composition of our *Lebenswelt* changes, so does the concept of knowledge. A world dominated by computer technology continuously creates new forms of knowledge, which human beings have to try to catch up with.

Rodowick’s account downgrades the epistemological dimension of skepticism. He is much more interested in how its existential dimension is reconfigured in the context of digital screen culture. The digital world radically postpones the question of the human relation to the world ‘as it is’ – simply because the digital world is never ‘as it is’ because it is in a permanent state of transformation. The digital world is indispensably created by the ‘intervention’ of the human hand, and its computated character entails that it is always changing, always being reconfigured.

What are we then to make of Cavell’s idea of film as a moving image of skepticism? The first answer is: Yes, film is a moving image of skepticism insofar as spectatorship is structurally analogous to a number of philosophical skepticist thought experiments, most notably Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (with immovable spectators watching a screen which displays projections of moving material objects via a light source located behind them). Film is also a “moving” image of skepticism in the sense that it characterises, along with other mediatic expressions such as science fiction literature and video games, the changing conditions of skepticist thought experiments in the context of digital culture on two levels: On the one hand, the themes and motifs addressed by film foreground the transformations of our shared environment (*Lebenswelt*) under the conditions of digital ontologies, on the other hand, the genesis of digital films takes place under different ‘ontological conditions’ as compared to analog cinema. These conditions change the terms in which the problem of skepticism is negotiated.

However, to conceptualise cinema as a moving image of skepticism does not entail any definite answer on the question whether cinema affirms or negates the skepticist stance, even though it is possible to sketch the general onto-epistemological character of cinematic processes of world-making. Speaking with Cavell, the most one can claim after careful investigation that the camera is “no better off epistemologically” than the eyes of the average human world spectator. One should add: What the “camera” is better off at is the addition of new perspectives on the world not directly available to the human sensory apparatus. This includes features such as slow-motion, time-lapse, extreme close-ups or aerial views, the manipulation of visual and aural data, correlating structural features of different images – all of them features not only explored and experimented with by filmmakers but by natural scientists as well.

This suggests that Cavell’s reflections as well as Rodowick’s updated digital version raise the question whether cinema’s perspectives on the world may actually reveal more than our own limited access to the world we live in. The medium makes available conditions of world-access, or perspectives on the world, and it is able to establish (perceptually non-standard) frameworks for exploring the human position in the world and the possibility of human knowledge of the world. For Sinnerbrink, Cavell assesses “[v]isual art [… ] precisely [as] a response to skepticism, a human expression of selfhood against metaphysical isolation, and thus a way of revivifying our sundered sense of connection with the world.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 106)

While, as argued, this might be the way in which cinema in its analogue state answers the modern philosophical problem of skepticism, digital cinema is a sign of a
transformation of the problems raised by skepticism: With the advent of the digital age, the epistemological and onto-existential dimension of skepticism recedes into the background while exposing another philosophically problematic dimension of knowing and acknowledging our (life) world as we believe to know it: “Despite the success of modern rationalism in conquering epistemic skepticism, the knowledge that really matters to us – about the self, morality, or our relations with others – remains frustratingly uncertain.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 103). In this sense, digital cinema “is not an overcoming of skepticism, but a different expression of it” (Rodowick 2007a: 175).