

# A Machine's First Glimpse in Time and Space

Trevor Mowchun

## ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this two-part essay is to theorize the relationships between religious disenchantment, the autonomy of art, and the phenomenon of contingency. These connections are held to be vital for an understanding of modern aesthetics in general, and the possibility is put forth that they come to a head in the most modern of all the arts: cinema. In the first part, an account of the contemporary rift between the immanence of art and the transcendence of the divine announces the end of the absolute and the beginning of the reign of contingency — a liberating yet catastrophic turning point where artists are responsible for creating meaning with the full knowledge that all meaning is a creation. In the second part, the secular autonomy of art is fully realized in the medium of film, particularly in the camera machine whose first glimpse in time and space reveals a disenchanted world or “contingency in the flesh.” The medium of the moving image and its modes of experience at the turn of the century are here understood as ontologically determined or overdetermined by the great symbolic threat against the powers of human agency — the world in its *own* image as opposed to the world in *our* image. However, at the same time this material threat against our will to power is counteracted by the desire to control the shock and indeterminacy of cinematic contingency, a desire fulfilled at the expense of acknowledging the implications of the new anti-absolute.

## KEYWORDS

modern art  
automatism  
contingency  
disenchantment  
cinematic ontology



## Part 1. The aesthetic automatisms of disenchantment

When thinking the history of a given phenomenon, we can find ourselves sliding as if on ice past its apparent givenness and into a time and space, a world where the object of our understanding speaks in a different language and may not respond to the same name. The history of art, if it's to be accurate and interesting, must therefore face up to the following fact about itself, a metaphysical fact: there was not always such *thing* as what we call "art." Our concept of art, if indeed such a concept can be extracted from our consciousness intact, is born just as these very objects are produced for their own sake. The capacity to produce something for its own sake in excess of all prescriptive functionalities and traditions is not exactly rudimentary: it is a historically warranted, timely possibility and, as we shall soon see, a psychologically inescapable, untimely one as well. Familiar notions such as "the work of art" (the material manifestation of art or the material worked over by the artist), "the creative process" or "the beginning" (the intentional or contingent origins of the work within a conscious action), and a subject position as routine and inextricable as that of the "viewer" or "spectator" — all of them taken for granted today as fundamental to what art is and as conditions of possibility for works of art *to work* — are at the same time irreversible outcomes of a great psycho-historical event, a paradigmatic turning point in the Western experience of art. This is the moment where the work of art turns to face itself, a moment which triggers the various passages, confrontations and epiphanies of "modern art."

The consequences of this epic event are equal parts success and sacrifice. I will summarize it as the complete reversal or radical upset of the hierarchical relation between art and the divine, culminating in the extrication of art from ritual and the resulting secularization of the artwork's ontology. For the longest time art would serve the sensible and expressive needs of religion, and while the relationship between the two is extremely troubled and complex, the basic principle of their mutual affinity seems relatively transparent: religion as institution is committed to exploring and regulating the threshold between the visible and the invisible, which is also the liminal province of art. As early as the time of ancient Greek civilization, art and religion were all but indistinguishable from each other.<sup>1</sup> Now we distinguish them all too clearly, almost automatically, and not just because one is tied to the senses while the other seeks to transcend them. A gradual parting of ways has left a hole too deep to be filled with anything less than

complete reconciliation on those old unspoken terms — a “black hole” of disenchantment. Here we are faced with the eclipse of the divine aura of presence, in other words with the assertion of presence as a purely material phenomenon cut off from the transcendental. Any hopeful mediator of the two sides risks grotesque parody and is susceptible perhaps to the melancholy of an incurable nostalgia. And where even the most steadfast non-believer may sometimes catch himself “looking for the light” in an object whose artistic beauty or sublimity briefly converts it back into a private idol, echoing the lost age of enchantment, his bristling fervor is still without metaphysical foundation: the sweet silent rapture of the devoted art lover is too idiosyncratic, gratifying, and often self-serving to count as anything resembling proper worship.

That the spirit of religion has left the body of art, splitting in the Cartesian manner of mind and body, is a phenomenon internal to the nature of art itself: a shock at the level of the absolute whereby the transcendence of the divine becomes secondary to the immanence of the aesthetic. What is called modern art is understandable as the autonomy of art; and if in the pre-modern period art lacked this sense of autonomy, it is because its creators lacked the Enlightenment’s conception of reason and the formation of the autonomous subject at the helm of human consciousness. The autonomous nature of art is therefore established and perhaps even cultivated by what philosophers like Heidegger and poets such as Hölderlin call “the flight of the gods.”<sup>2</sup> Now, the apocalyptic tone and cold sense of abandonment tempting the philosopher and poet into the abyss of nihilism are not all despairing and do not incite or justify the vengeance of nihilism in the form of misguided and compensatory acts of deification or dogmatism. For the flight of the gods as a philosophical event associated with the various phases of modernist self-definition may constitute a transformative turning point and point of no return, where the human being takes flight, as it were, undergoing existential revolution by dwelling in a world of his or her own making, rivaling the gods and taking responsibility for the death of gods as Nietzschean “overmen.” This act of “taking flight” is a precarious experience in which the floor of faith drops beneath one’s feet; and whether we fly or fall, create or destroy, there is a crisis to be undergone that takes the measure of the modern subject’s newfound autonomy and responsibility. So perhaps art cuts loose from religion when humanity itself *becomes* a religion. The modern artist — by accepting an irredeemable freedom subject to the creative whims and ecstasies of the new religion of humanity — has lost the

key to the representation of the divine; he can no longer derive from the conditions of his practice the contractual destiny of representation to revere the inimitable through imitation and acts of deference. This ancient “contract” that underlies and guides artistic production in the pre-modern era — mandating a sensible architecture of manifestation and preservation for the divine absolute — has been irrevocably broken seemingly beyond the capacity for renewal. From this point on, starting with the Enlightenment and culminating with Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God, the nature of art becomes a question that each and every artist must answer for himself; and in order to create, the modern artist begins by bearing the burden of *self-questioning* as a perilous rite of passage.

Giorgio Agamben speculates on the psychology of the modern artist and describes him as “the man without content,” borrowing the peculiar phrase from Robert Musil’s unfinished novel *The Man Without Qualities*.<sup>3</sup> Agamben pays tribute to the novel’s specifically modernist predicament by embracing the idea of an individual whose burden of freedom and inexhaustible potential is based upon a heightened sense of detachment, dispersion, and psychic neutrality. In the figure of the man without content, we have a kind of “infant-man” marked by the absence of a past and future that begins not tomorrow but today — in a present of pure and naïve potentiality bound to go unrealized. As an artist in the modern sense and a metaphor for the work of art, the man without content hints at something paradoxical, even uncanny, regarding the disappearance or death of any aesthetic content that is intrinsic and therefore vital to the nature of art. For what art has become is precisely a rootless nature that is now in perpetual discovery of its own nature, forever compensating for the fact that tradition has been relinquished for experimentation, the ultimate experiment being that which the artist performs upon himself. According to Agamben, the artist has to a certain extent *become* the work of art by which he lives or dies.<sup>4</sup>

But who or what is the man without content? My sense is that he is someone who practices the asking of a question with no answer. Here the plot of artistic modernism thickens as it spirals more inwardly. From the perspective of the modern artist, the arbitrariness of content — call it contingency — that stems from the blanket questioning and incommensurability of content signifies a paradigmatic shift in emphasis from *content to form* within the domain of aesthetics and from *objectivity to subjectivity* within the phenomenological conditions of consciousness.

Amidst these modernist reversals and in the absence of divine determinations, “form” emerges as a zero-degree “remainder,” the only content capable of constituting viable criteria for artistic production and therefore theoretically justifying art. But since this content is nothing but form taking its cue from the lack of any intrinsic content at the heart of modern consciousness (except for its own subjectivity, its own sense of self-possession), the modern artist is without a ground on which to stand where he might stake cultural authority over the creative process. In this sense he lacks grounds for an impetus or calling that is not the unmistakable sound of his own secret appeal to be summoned, chosen, and not merely self-appointed. During this process, this hall of mirrors of wild self-reflexivity, the modern artist may recognize this counterfeit inspiration as a surge of ambition, feeling a sense of purpose deep within his bones, perhaps gnawing away. He alleviates the pangs of purpose whispering of them into his own ear or shouting them to the deafening of all ears. When rehearsed in private or declared in public, his intentions may awkwardly flirt with doctrine or decree, slipping into the rant or at least carrying the ring of a manifesto. And when it’s all said and done, he must complete his work by signing it on the front, not the back, for all to see as a significant part of the work’s content, not just its cache. As sole author he resides at the source of what he creates, with formal responsibility for the work as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Upon closer inspection, the “autonomy of art” is a mythical idea, for it isolates the canvas of creation and fancies it blank in an almost primordial sense. The criterion of form raises the potential of the medium and insists on its resonance across all instances; and with the medium fully exposed, form, the very face of autonomy, delivers to consciousness a mirror image of itself as perpetually conscious of itself. While an image, like consciousness, is always *of* something, this peculiarly self-conscious “something” can be, at least in principle, “anything whatsoever.” But in reality, how can these wild notions of openness, indeterminacy, and *tabula-rasa* blankness be anything more than powerful illusions or fantasies, the mirages of artistic modernism? For all its freedom, creative consciousness seems fated to wander in an inhospitable desert wasteland where the will to create is coaxed by sheer solitude yet simultaneously crippled by the absence of redemptive powers beyond the horizon. Artistic action thus becomes a strangely hypothetical situation within which all things are perceived as possible: it’s as if the beginning of the creative process commences all possible processes, appearing as a fixed point with the widest possible view, a sweeping

panorama. Here lies what would be a great opportunity or inauguration if it did not have the form of an internal command emanating from deep within the man without content: *Venture at your own risk, you who are on your own ... and beware: where there is no fate, there is only chance, so make chance your fate—guide it and grant it the necessity of your wildest whims!* The prospect of a beginning that is not resolved in a finished work but rather *realized* in an unfinished work, forcing the artist to use or at least acknowledge chance as the price of his existential freedom, stands as a succinct sign and monolithic testament to the disappearance of the absolute from the realm of aesthetics. Art that relies on chance as a technique indulges in this disappearance—dancing on a grave—by necessitating the freedom it affords.

A significant existential provocation of art upon its departure from religion and entry into modernism is the establishment of a standard for freedom that surpasses the reach of any single artist, outstretching the will to power so as to empower, as it were, *power itself*. Stranded and alone, courageous yet doubtful, standing straight and trembling on the threshold of absolute freedom, the “contentless” artist has absolutely nothing which he ought to conceive, express, or honor in the name of art. And yet everything that enters the horizon of his consciousness within a culture that disseminates information much faster than it can incorporate it, the great flood of a collective and never-ending dream from which no one can fully awaken, is built into the very fabric of the fateful moment of creation, filling the air with the amorphous and ambiguous *substance* of possibility. And when the concept of possibility is understood as a determinant structure of the infinitely meaningful that cannot be fully resolved or exhausted, the concept is thereby transformed and functions as a condition: the condition of possibility. We can think of this as the material analogue of the psychic condition that Sartre and the existentialists describe as our condemnation to freedom. In this picture, the concept of chance must also undergo transformation from the factor of probability into one of the primary forces that *conditions* possibility, functioning as its perpetual motor and resilient openness to sudden movements, activations, and reconciliations of difference.<sup>6</sup>

With chance as a guiding principle of such various and vertiginous possibilities, art comes to resemble the actions of the *automatic*: this is an event where meaning self-regulates, thwarting the compass of human intentionality. It is precisely through chance amidst the clutches of its

clandestine and autonomous operations that one can discover elements of significance and forms of affect seemingly untouched by any established system of signs or recognizable modes of consciousness in what I referred to earlier as the mirage of artistic modernism. The influence of chance on the creative process is also potentially productive insofar as it activates art's newfound autonomy and abstracts the spirit of process from the products which await it. We can say that it enchants the process with a pulse of organic vitality, which appears in certain hands to work itself out or fall into place by dint of a logic whose meaning need not be determined in advance and which remains to a certain extent *unknown*. The motive behind the method, if we can call it one, is not about finding order in chaos but rather a way to acknowledge chaos, endure it, and in the process come through the crisis of meaning not necessarily "in the know" so much as comfortably in the dark. Art's secular turn is ultimately a disorienting one: the ancient appetite for meaning lingers in the wake of progress and all pretense of having at last overcome the lure of teleology.

Despite all the ambitious projects of self-realization surrounding art's uncharted autonomy and secularization, there is actually nothing inherently at stake in the work of art except the stakes raised in honor of work itself, that is, of *production* (Agamben uses the term "praxis").<sup>7</sup> Only by beginning the work — by getting *to work* and *working out* an act of thought — can the artist raise the stakes of art on its own terms and avenge the missing absolute without relapse. Hence the very act of beginning, more daring and decisive than reaching an end, is the great emancipatory gesture, a suspension of the tangled reasons and external orders for beginning at all. And since beginnings do not temporally precede the modern artwork but remain spatially synchronized with it, they persist throughout its creation, shadowing or haunting it, granting the "workly" character in the form of traces and tones so that something is *at work* in the work of art rather than *worked through* and brought to an irrevocable close. The work as work grows out of its beginning as if the latter were a pot of earth, and in some cases it comes full circle as if returning to the earth. There is a subtle yet significant difference between "rooted" artworks and those which exploit the beginning to erect an edifice indifferent to its origins. This might explain why artists routinely come upon the predicament of having to face the beginning and pass its test of will as a kind of prerequisite for reaching the end and declaring definitive closure — a great departure from the radical deferrals of will required in dignified servitude to something "higher" and

“unrepresentable.” The beginning becomes a hands-on, almost topographic exploration of the parameters of subjectivity as conditioned by an artistic medium; yet because the conditions of a medium are conditions of possibility or contingencies, their limits can be transgressed once the beginning gets underway and takes on a life of its own.

I believe the provocative pressure of the beginning as pure unredeemable potential is the most dramatic expression of the autonomy of art, an autonomy which fuels the “contentless” psychology of artistic creation in the absence of a so-called Creator. This magnified sense of endlessness and drift within the self-consciousness of modernity may spiral into the idea, however untenable, that consciousness has content in and of itself. What the relational perspective of phenomenology exposed as a fantasy (that consciousness, even self-consciousness, is never without an object about which to be conscious) is further called into question by Agamben’s notion of a man *without* content and the tendency towards solipsism in high modernist art. But the conditions of the artist’s self-consciousness are not strictly phenomenological but also *ontological*, for they seem to be reinforced by the virtual ground of art as an alternate or framed world — a world that we have, according to Nietzsche, as a reminder that truth is better served as a creation of *new* worlds rather than a mere correspondence with *the* world. In describing art as the opening of another world or a parenthetical suspension of the world as we know it, Nietzsche acknowledges the possibility for artists and spectators to experience a vibrant and habitable refuge from the harsh impossibility of absolute truth.<sup>8</sup> In this way the activities of art making and viewing provide a much needed break from compulsive attempts to know the external world: the artist as philosopher is fascinated by the complex surfaces of things and never tempted by what is presumed to be hidden beneath those surfaces, the truth-core that reduces surfaces into layers to be peeled away in search of mythical essences beyond all reckoning. The work of art provides a basis and critical energy not for discovering or creating truth but rather for leaving the realm of truth altogether and, in leaving it, ensuring that one never arrives at a truth in disguise. I suggest that the modern artist is perfectly positioned to reclaim the necessity of creating truth; and in moments of great inspiration or rebellion, he can expose the “createdness” of all truths starting with his own. Yet the artist’s pursuit of the depths of surfaces, analogous to the pursuit of form as content, forecloses the actual creation and destruction of truth as aesthetic possibilities. And where truth no longer holds sway, where even revelation is an act of creation,

the stage is set for contingency (a Dionysian drama): the unnecessary nature of truth, the fixed plurality of truth, or the contradiction of truth and its aftermath.<sup>9</sup> It is in this aftermath, reckless and irrevocable, where the self-consciousness of the artist and the autonomy of the artwork come together in passages and eruptions of becoming that refuse to harden into states of being.

My emphasis on the psychic dynamics of an artwork's beginning — i.e., the vertiginous topography of blankness and the empowered folly of the artist's secular leap into darkness — is based on a reading of creative consciousness as liberated and threatened by the palpable phenomenon of contingency weaving its way through much of modern art in numerous forms and guises, ranging from Botticelli to Pollack in painting, Sterne to Chekhov in literature, Rodin to Caro in sculpture, and arguably epitomized in the avant-garde music of John Cage. An appreciation of the relationship between art and contingency will be crucial for an understanding of the complex psychology of modern art and the man without content. First, the concept of contingency will help us account for those aspects of artworks which exist in between form and content: unintended or unfinished gestures and resonant "becomings," extraneous to the content and deforming of the form yet somehow essential to the life of the work. Second, the freedom relished in even the most spontaneous improvisation is ultimately a postponement of the responsibility of freedom, for it shifts the weight of artistic decisiveness from the beginning, where chance holds sway, to the difficult task of reaching a legitimate end (not to mention a masterful one), where contingency might dawn as paradoxically necessary. Third, once contingency renders the creative process both playful and automatic, the idea of relative value takes the place of absolute belief, which means there will no longer be clear objective standards of artistic worth. I am most struck when creative inspiration precedes any practical knowledge or precise plans for its aesthetic realization, for if they are to be genuinely autonomous such expressive acts must proceed without the security of a prepackaged motivation or obligation. And since expression can even occur without the stability of conscious intention — for example as a negotiation with contingency's esoteric appeals to the automatism of the unconscious — the will to create art, which for Nietzsche is the highest and most affirmative exercise of the will to power, can assume the form of an *a priori* mood: a mood in which one is no longer in complete possession of one's will throughout the act of creation. Indeed one may find oneself *in the mood* to

wield the will to create and desire creation for its own sake without knowing why or to what end. But if the point of departure is actually little more than a desire to depart, a strong yet abstract desire to exercise the will regardless of direction (which Fernando Pessoa describes in appropriately casual terms as “keeping busy”), then the door to the maze of contingency is an equally dead end, an unsurpassable threshold — for the beginning as an arbitrary catalyst extends in many directions at once, and the temptation may be to take all of them.<sup>10</sup> In this context, contingency encompasses the mood of indecision suffered by the will, which seems pressured to pursue several creative paths simultaneously, as if only the paths themselves have power of conviction for the man without content.

If contingency and its necessitation have dodged the religious absolute, functioning as aesthetic criteria for new “anti-absolutes” and creative processes sufficient unto themselves, then in a disenchanted age characterized by the devaluation of all values, how exactly does contingency function in the realm of aesthetics, a realm where human values are dramatically enacted and routinely subverted? Furthermore, to what extent might the movement of chance and the principle of contingency actually serve to demonstrate or reconstitute the necessity of art, perhaps to rethink the premodern values of metaphysical presentness and timelessness which strike us as old only because they seem irretrievably lost?

A preliminary theoretical response is that once contingency materializes into necessity and the process of devaluation gives way to the perpetual prospect of reevaluation — and once contingency is acknowledged as the psychological condition of the man without content who finds freedom in the paradox of unscripted fate — then necessity shall be stripped of its brutal command as the great dictator of ontological determinism, becoming at last a thing of beauty. Seeing the beauty in necessity makes possible what I wish to call “the enchantment of contingency” and marks an act of will *acting against* its own lust for power over the world. The enchantment of contingency, however, is not something for artists to accomplish but rather for art itself to embody via the evolution of the aesthetic, which artists and spectators may then choose to acknowledge or not. These acts of acknowledgment can come to take the place of knowledge and form a vital part of our aesthetic experience; however, the enchantment of contingency can only be embodied through a mechanical rather than chance-based process of automatism, meaning that

the medium itself must be “enchanted.” Though modern art is characterized by various types of self-reflexive investigation and scrutiny of its media — investigations that often draw deliberately on chance as a means of activating the autonomous ground of the aesthetic — there is one medium whose artistic status was not at first sufficiently secure to support such investigations because it fundamentally lacked and seemed incapable of earning the necessary condition of autonomy. For this medium which grew out of urban modernity and in some sense grew up in modernism, an actual mechanical automatism usurped the position and labor of human artistry to such an extent that the man without content started to lose, as it were, the form of man. The mechanical medium of cinema with its transparent animation of the photographic record of the real and promiscuous inheritance of the distinctive features of its artistic predecessors ushers in like a wind or wave an epochal birth of contingency in aesthetics. By naturalizing the world in its own image rather than in the image of the divine, cinema displaces the modern artist and perhaps also heralds his transformative death, better known as metamorphosis.

## Part 2. A machine’s first glimpse in time and space

If we can accept, after the art historian T.J. Clark, that contingency “is an issue of representation [and] not empirical life-chances,” then it can emerge, first, as a historical process where representation adapts to ruptures or crises of meaning by becoming more and more susceptible to meaninglessness, and, second, as the last step representation must take in order to enter and withstand the chaotic void of the unrepresentable.<sup>11</sup> The paradoxical passage of representation into the condition of non-representation is characterized by the (im)possibility of a self-effacing amalgamation with the excesses and exigencies of the object represented. This object has roots in the external world, and the uncanny power of cinematic representation in particular is to replant those roots in the realm of the image.

Before proceeding with an analysis of cinematic contingency along these lines, it is important to acknowledge that the dense history of moving images is short on concrete examples of pure contingency running amok at

the expense of artistic intention and various logics of perception, though perhaps surveillance imagery bears the aimless yet potentially volatile realism of contingency better than the conventional elements of surprise and coincidence utilized by narrative fiction. According to Mary Ann Doane's insightful study of cinematic contingency, the so-called chaos of the contingent as captured by a faithful and unthinking camera-eye is always tempered by some sense of order — an order that she describes metaphorically as “the brake of the film frame.”<sup>12</sup> In my hypothesis that cinema marks the first attempt to transcend representation through representation, the first aesthetic embodiment of contingency sufficient to question the paradigm of representation itself, I am also taking seriously Andre Bazin's notion that cinema is by nature the medium yet to be invented, forever on the cusp of transcending its mediation and progressing towards its origins in totality.<sup>13</sup> I further suggest that the medium's ontological claim upon the world, claiming it as its own, is enacted phenomenologically in a constant pursuit of the perfect spectacle — but time and again we learn that the world in its own image just isn't spectacular beyond our initial gasp of astonishment. And so *more world* — in higher fidelity and with greater doses of contingency — is always needed to fuel our great fantasy of reality.

When cinema reached a point in its rapid technological and aesthetic evolution where it could open its representational doors more widely, gathering in more world with more means at its disposal (automatic cameras, color, and the synchronization of sound, to name only a few), for the first time the object of representation seemed to survive intact and even flourish in all its particularity; we could perceive as well as feel the very “presencing” that consciousness routinely reduces to the presence of “this” or “that,” complete with a name and ready-to-hand, as Heidegger might say. As the machine's first glimpse in time and space matured, representation could present the world in the light of its own image, a phrase which evokes at least three unprecedented possibilities. First, an image can be created out of the very light by which objects are perceived. Second, that which makes an image of itself must be *allowed* to do so, if not by a human hand then by mediums indifferent to humans like machines or mirrors; and the result of this allowance is an image that is not only distinguished by the singularity of what it shows, but also illuminated by the pulse of its aura, the atmospheric quality of the quantities depicted automatically. Third, an image of the world forged from such automatism will be in a sense free of thought; for

thought, while undoubtedly active, has not entered the image by overtaking the logic of mechanical reproduction. I'm tempted to say that to film the world is to get outside of our heads, deferring to automatic processes not unlike the drop into dreamland. But what's most essential is that within cinema's mechanical conditions and aesthetic possibilities, the contingency afflicting the creative process in modern art is shown to infiltrate the radical automatisms of a new artistic medium, signaling a seismic shift from the manmade image to what I have been calling the world in its own image. Both the infiltrating world and the act of infiltration itself are carriers or harbingers of contingency. Peter Geimer in his brief essay on photographic contingency describes this event succinctly and with a nod to Aristotle as "an *occurrence*: something in the image *occurs* or something *falls into* the image."<sup>14</sup>

But the cinematic representation of contingency, captured by the camera's unseeing, unblinking, unfeeling "eye and ear," is not only thoroughly gripped and occupied but also deeply moved, as if it were emotionally stirred by the subtle whims of nature, the bustle of crowds tearing through the background, the inconspicuous winking of minor details with major consequences, and perhaps above all by the resonant and receding soundscapes of the off-screen dimension whose limits are known only by the imagination. While the photographic basis of cinema is undoubtedly of the order of representation, the representation of contingency is, it seems to me, precisely a *disordering* of representation. Perhaps the world represented through cinema's powers of representational embodiment is best described as fundamentally unstable, breaking free of the chains of identification, iteration, and objectification that tend to accompany most conceptions of representation. The sense of contingency I have in mind is akin to a natural force, and in the moving image it is at its peak of pervasiveness: the uncertain condition of an occurrence, all occurrences, rather than the exceptional occurrence of an uncertainty. For viewers of cinema, the crystallized chaos of a life sliced indiscriminately and presented as a structured, comprehensive representation, a monumental ambiguity that invites and deflects our efforts to express it, unfolds as a symbolic threat against the powers of human agency, specifically over the production and reception of art. The human and non-human stand in a reciprocal, perhaps symbiotic relation as a machine becomes indispensable for seeing the world disenchanting, the world from which the gods have taken flight. And this machine, which affirms our existential condition, at

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the same time becomes a surprisingly powerful tool for cultivating contingencies of nature into what I will call necessities of culture.

We can understand this complex relationship between contingency and culture by coming to terms with exactly what and how film represents and where it places us — perhaps displacing us — regarding this notion of the world in its own image and the overturning or undoing of conventional patterns of representation that it entails. As Stanley Cavell puts it in *The World Viewed*:

Film takes our very distance and powerlessness over the world as the condition of the world's natural appearance. It promises the exhibition of the world in itself. This is its promise of candor: that what it reveals is entirely what is revealed to it, that nothing revealed by the world in its presence is lost.<sup>15</sup>

For film to follow through on its promise of candor, a promise which it keeps automatically, amounts to a responsibility of ontological depths and proportions. The responsibility is towards what Cavell calls “the world as a whole”; and while cinematic representation fulfills this promise of absolute revelation in photographic terms, according to Cavell our capacity to experience this image as “natural” equally depends on the psychological terms of our distance from and powerlessness over the world as we know it.<sup>16</sup> But how can film keep its promise of candor if the world in all its presence exceeds the limitations of any representational medium, even one as faithful as film? On my reading of Cavell, film's promise has more to do with fidelity or honesty (an ethics of representation) than accuracy, objectivity, or mastery (a logistics of representation). Viewers become distant and powerless in an experience of passivity before the world in its own image, perhaps miming the gesture of the camera's fundamental passivity, and the appeal of the silver screen is that for all it shows, it ultimately *screens us*: at last we are no longer viewing the world in *our* image.

The promise of candor and our consent to passivity in the theater or on the couch makes the ontology of film, over and above the content of a given film, essentially *melodramatic*: in excess of itself, in love with the world, anxious over the loss of its love, willingly powerless over forces beyond its control. From the simplest one-take film to the most formally elaborate narrative or avant-garde epic and from those halfhearted glances on our part to the most sustained and open-minded forms of engagement, moving

images *bear too much of the world* — the small piece of the world that they bear is *kept whole*. But in the face of cinema’s constant movement, abundance, surprise, repetition, revelation, and irrevocability, in the presence of the absence of any absolute and the unshakable necessity of contingency as our calling, we viewers are perfectly *at home*, affirming what we might otherwise deny by facing and often relishing that which our daily fears and psychic homeostasis help us to avoid. This sense of being at home *before* the world rather than *inside* it, that is, in a place outside it and looking in, aligns the experience of film with the experience of modern life. Cavell describes this experience intimately in the first-person as one in which the world is felt to be complete without me; however, because this world is defined by contingency, I would add that it too is incomplete. It’s almost as if the modern condition of contingency, epitomized or at least materialized by the modern medium of film, transforms the world in its own image from a solid into a gas such that we are no longer perturbed by the question of how its concrete particulars might fit together into a meaningful whole. They do not fit because there is nothing that they would fit into — the world is not a container. And they do not fight because there is nothing that they would rather be — their being as such is all that matters. A scattered sense of simultaneity now stands as a substitute for a fortified sense of unity.

To return to Clark’s inquiry into the connection between contingency and modernism in painting, he offers an illuminating analysis of contingency as a means of rediscovering lost pictorial unities through disfiguration and abstraction as opposed to conventional standards of realism:

Contingency was a fate to be suffered, and partly to be taken advantage of, but only in order to conjure back out of it — out of the false regularities and indiscriminate free flow — a new pictorial unity. Out of the flux of visual particles would come the body again (says Cézanne) — naked, in Nature, carrying the fixed weaponry of sex. Out of the shifts and transparencies of virtual space (says Picasso) would come the violin and the mandolin player. Tokens of art and life.<sup>17</sup>

While contingency manifests in painting through abstraction and in cinema through a kind of hyperrealism, I wish to suggest that the two aesthetic practices despite their extreme differences in appearance may share the same underlying ambition of aesthetic unification. As distinct sets of tools for both the “retooling” or reconstruction of commonplace figures (painting) and the radical acknowledgment of the world as a whole (cinema) — tools

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for the creation of what Clark calls “tokens” (the currency, stock, or grammar of representation as an aesthetic practice) — they come together through the underlying therapeutic function of contingency in aesthetics: the conjuring of new pictorial unities and new standards for what constitutes unity, integrity, or sense in the work of art. And my hunch is that cinematic contingency in particular is what allows the world to appear or *reappear* in its own image and as a whole under seemingly impossible conditions, that is, in the absence of absolutes which had previously determined it and buttressed its unity metaphysically.

I am tempted to proceed here by claiming that every art form, not just painting and cinema, is driven as if subconsciously towards some form of unity, for even disunity is a rethinking of the form or grammar of figuration. This drive is premised on the fact that the pictorial unities of conventional representation cannot be taken for granted and may over time lose their ability to speak to us as viable figures of artistic expression. Even worse, they may provoke indifference, skepticism, or even contempt towards the rhetoric of symmetry and the calcification of the cliché, which for some marks a hopeless cheapening of artistic value. The courageous act of breaking down familiar unities not only “defamiliarizes” them (e.g., Cézanne’s particle nude, Picasso’s virtual musicians, Bacon’s effaced faces, Pollack’s all-over line, etc.) but also resuscitates them, breathes new life into them, inviting us to gaze at a provisional unity still wet from the process by which a fixed unity was reevaluated for or against the times.

Indeed one wonders what kind of pictorial unity can stem from a destabilizing surge of contingency. The magician-like *conjuring* of new pictorial unities from the critical reassessments and backstage experiments of contingency would appear, at least when successfully executed, to conjure away the very processes which for Clark are instrumental for reviving the old tokens of art and life. These traditional figures may come back to us primed for persistence only after passing through the trials of contingency. Think of it as the order of tradition being taken to the court of chance where it is asked to explain itself to a skeptical jury. It is clear from the work of Picasso, Cézanne, and other moderns that traditional artistic subjects and unities have only survived by irrevocably changing, undergoing timely revision and seeking new criteria of justification, demonstrating the essential paradox that modern art’s manner of respecting tradition is either by breaking with it or breaking it down, allowing contingency to reign supreme. Since the

conditions of possibility for new tokens of tradition are inflammatory contingencies, the figures of art can assume as many forms as the imagination permits; but no single figure can emerge as necessary relative to others, perhaps as a consequence of the storm of relativity unleashed by consistency. This is how I understand the value of artworks that retain a sense of the formlessness of their making as a call for new forms to continually arise. Such works are prevented from reaching representational “resting places” lest their aesthetic unity come at the expense of the aesthetic process, whose contingencies have the power to reinvigorate aesthetic experience and forge new traditions with the fuel or spark of experimentation.

Clark’s conception of contingency as a way for painters to reconstitute new pictorial unities from abstract fluxes and flows and dispersals of form is reversed by Cavell’s conception of the ontology of film where the filmmaker is secondary to the machine and abstraction replaced by a certain over-determination or idealization of representation. In the spirit of Clark’s insistence that contingency is specifically an issue of representation over and above mere chance — an issue that seems temporarily resolved when abstraction and its openness to chance give way to the discovery of new modes of representation better equipped to acknowledge our everyday experience — I would like to track the evolution of contingency from something that is worked through in representation (an epistemology of painting) to something that inhabits the very ground of representation (an ontology of film). What if this epic revelation that Cavell terms “the exhibition of the world in itself” could be seen not just as emerging from contingent processes but also as casting the world in all its contingent concreteness? Perhaps this condition of cinematic representation ultimately renders the experience of cinema abstract by placing spectators at a distance from the world in its own image — as if it were perceived as foreign or alien — and also powerless over it as if cinema’s projected rush of events onscreen and the mosaic of anonymous details tugging away at the unity of the image constituted what Clark might call “tokens of chance.” But if most films strike us as lacking the variables of contingency, dictated by literary principles of narrative and falling neatly into codified and contractual genres, my sense is that for film, it’s not a matter of using chance to thwart cliché (a specialty of the avant-garde) but using clichés to cope with the contingencies of *this* world — which, beginning in the twentieth century, saw wave after wave of artistic and political utopias

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flooding the social fabric and culminating more often than not in disappointment or disaster. While all modern art is subject to contingency (all modern artists *face* contingency as a possibility), for film, contingency is a *necessity* (all filmmakers are faced with it, whether they realize it or not).<sup>18</sup> Film's share in the contingencies of reality entails that its mode of mediation is contingent upon reality, that the medium derives the better part of its existence from something that cannot permanently guarantee it. Therefore the medium is less a form of mediation than a type of subjection.

Cinema seems to begin provocatively as though it were a kind of global experiment on representation, showing us a world whose fundamental contingency disfigures the meanings we have come to expect from images. This mode of disfiguration — a machine's first glimpse in time and space — is altogether different from Cézanne's color patches or Seurat's pointillist dots operating simultaneously with figurative elements. The machinic gaze of the cinema has been conceptualized and in some cases romanticized by classical film theory as a source of revelation, a sign of defiance against anthropocentrism, or the wild tangent of an art that begins radically in non-art — as if a planet that showed no signs of being able to support life suddenly proved hospitable to us.<sup>19</sup> Bazin goes even further in his claim that the machinic gaze predates cinema and photography and perhaps cannot be traced back to any particular mode of representation, suggesting that the cinematic incarnation of the myth of a total representation or simulacrum introduces yet again in its absolute futility the possibility of definitive pictorial unity in art, awakening one of humanity's deepest desires and oldest myths: the impossible preservation of a perishable world.<sup>20</sup>

What does the cinematic machine see with its one eye when we decide to see through it, with it, and by its lights, giving shape to our perceptions and the collective orientation of memories and fantasies, which are not as private as we once thought? The movie camera sees everything there is to see from a circumscribed albeit porous point of view — gathering the light by which all things coalesce into points of emphasis and obscurity within a finite horizon of intelligibility — generating concrete images of lush labyrinthine forests of detail and yielding experiences that no human being could encounter outside of a dream. But the machine's condition of unbridled seeing also derives its optical sophistication from absent-mindedness: an innocent, hypothetical, or mythical kind of seeing

which undergoes an act of exposure so pervasive and piercing that for us it would amount to the blinding of consciousness. To see without directly seeing or to see without being able to direct the sense of sight is *to be seen*; and the recording of this “being seen” takes the form, I suggest, of a *revelation*. However, in a disenchanted age this revelation must be technological or perhaps “techno-theological”; it is a revelation that we ordain be carried out *without* us while we sit back and watch our wish for the world-as-such and the resonant structure of things unfold *as planned*. Cavell described this power of cinema as a promise to reveal everything that is revealed to it, nothing less than the world as a whole; and now, in a bold move from ontology to psychology and the intimation of ethics, he diagnoses this brute mechanical operation as a refined human action: “letting our actions go out of our hands.”<sup>21</sup> The human decision to hand ourselves over to something without hands sums up the machine’s first glimpse. Unlike the self-reliant and sentimental gesture typically known as “letting go,” the machine’s first glimpse as an exemplary automatism of modernism is a displacement or disorientation of human action. Cinema’s invitation to let our actions go out of our hands is an invitation precisely to *do nothing*: conscious unconsciousness, mechanical miracles, the knowledge of acknowledgment — paradoxically passive actions stemming from the will’s decisive moment of wild abandon where it takes a reverse leap of faith into its own wide openness.

But let’s not forget that the machine’s first glimpse in time and space is glimpsed by *us*, we who oppose contingency with insatiable appetites for meaning yet suffer contingency when we become skeptical of or disillusioned with the meta-value of meaning making. It seems to me that cinema’s melodramatic display of contingency to the spectator—so overwhelming when unleashed onscreen at the end of the nineteenth century in the liminal realm between art and amusement where raw recordings of the everyday world could captivate with minimal embellishment—was in turn overwhelmed by a siege of creative appropriation and commercial exploitation. The rawness of this revelation would ultimately require the near-impossible acknowledgment that in the everyday world, nothing is more important or worthwhile than anything else because *everything* is important (albeit only things, the being of things). The machine seems to say, “You can see for yourself just *how* I see: the shepherd and his herd, the flag and the pole on which it is pinned, a briefcase of bills and a pot of earth, a pair of eyes and a pair of hands and those pears on the

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windowsill, ha! All are equal and free to be, to come and go and come back again, for in my eyes everything makes the same impression or else it does not even make an appearance. You see, when I 'see,' I am thoroughly *touched*, and it's the same for you before you start with your scanning and grasping and occasional fetishizing." Here we have the spirit (though I can't quite justify the attitude) of democracy grounding the ontology of the moving image, a democracy rendered self-evident by the camera's neutrality and discovered "in nature" rather than instituted by culture.

Because the machine's first glimpse is invariably glimpsed by us, this radical decentering of human subjectivity appears to become the source of an almost reflexive *re-centering* through the eagerness of filmmakers, viewers, and critics to structure, domesticate, and in many cases repress the very miracle or disaster of representational embodiment in cinema as if its mechanical nature strikes its human inventors and supporters as some sort of original sin. As a full swing from exposure to expression, the usurping of the machinic gaze by the human gaze through the point-of-view shot is perhaps the most dominant act of appropriation, transforming the necessity of contingency into an instance of rational subjectivity. For example, even in the earliest films, the Lumière brothers filter and arrange their images in order to imply linear narratives. Their filmic record of a toddler learning to walk becomes an exercise in suspense: a rugged sidewalk stands as an obstacle between her and a doll positioned in the foreground seemingly within our reach — yet of course viewers are unable to intervene (the price of cinematic voyeurism). In another example, a brick wall is demolished by a group of workers only for their efforts to be shown in reverse. In a puff of smoke, the wall reconstitutes itself and throws the authentic moment of collapse under an uncanny microscope. The reasoning behind such collaborative resistance against the irrationality of cinematic contingency is historically and psychologically complex; the concept of contingency has always posed a threat to reason itself, which is responsible for setting and sometimes overstepping limits of control. With respect to cinema at least, I believe this resistance amounts to the desire to *control* the world and its images rather than *let* the world happen because a world abandoned to the contingencies of disenchantment by a machine, one that appears to see right through the aura of necessity surrounding human values, which since the undermining of religion have yet to be thoroughly reevaluated, seems to us an *intolerable* world, a pleasure to view and a horror to inhabit. The containment, concealment and sterilization of cinematic contingency's

explicit disenchantment is in a sense a psychological necessity difficult to overcome.

From the very beginning, film's formal invitation to contingency has been largely declined in favor of theatrical and literary legacies — such as the technique of scripting the apparently candid or structuring time and space in narrative terms — which are evident even in the observational actualities of the Lumières. Perhaps the contingent event was hastily checked because it overwhelmed sensation and was recalcitrant to interpretation, as Maxim Gorky implied in his enthusiastic yet skeptical review of the inaugural Lumière films: “The extraordinary impression it [cinema] creates is so unique and complex that I doubt my ability to describe it with all its nuances.”<sup>22</sup> While there is no direct reference to cinematic contingency in this early account of 1896, Gorky's intimidated disposition and the strange feelings aroused in him by the cinematic spectacle — particularly in response to the absence of color and sound in the Lumières' representation of everyday life — lead him to an interpretation of the moving image that resonates with our discussion of contingency: “Before you a life is surging, a life deprived of words and shorn of the living spectrum of colours — the grey, the soundless, the bleak and dismal life.”<sup>23</sup> The absence of color and sound aside, Gorky's experience appears to be simultaneously inspired and deflated by the film's teeming excesses of worldly detail which, combined with the fleetingness and exchangeability of those details, drains from cinema the unmistakable marks of artistic conviction: the radiant colors of meaning and purpose which buoy the spirit and guide the ethical life. Gorky's attempts to find meaning in these images seemed upon reflection to *bounce back* as if the screen were as much a barrier as an opening to the sensibility and psychic interior of the spectator.

Should one succeed in finding a way to return the gaze of the machine without oneself becoming machine but rather a “man without content,” this unique point of view will mark the *limit* of the human will beyond which all persistence, change, and repetition run free, clamor, and storm about by dint of powers recalcitrant to attribution and every type of voluntary lording. Film catches contingency in the flesh as intractable plenitude, meaningful meaninglessness, nature's uprooting and culture's alienness to itself, the anarchic drift of Being after the flight of the gods; and in catching it only to be caught by it in turn, this modern medium demonstrates that the human will is our ability to affect our lives and those

with whom we share or refuse to share them — not “life itself”: not the resonant effects of innumerable crisscrossing causes, forces within which I am what I am regardless of my will. The desire to alter what exists is exposed by the “moral center” of cinema as the desire to alter what once existed (the shot) or determine what has yet to come into existence (montage). In film, the presencing of the world to itself — a world where humans figure not only as agents but also as objects — is the luminous threshold that the will cannot cross without faltering, overstepping its bounds, and slipping into its own conditions of projection — on the one hand longing for oneiric identification or on the other hand a nihilism bent on the destruction of established, perhaps worn-out world views. It's almost as if from film's promise of candor comes the breaking of the promise of desire we call fantasy or hope, calling us out as despisers of the real. This is why the harsh “reality check” of cinema will never cease to tempt us into the exploitation of reality for the sake of fantasy by using concrete camera views in the construction of abstract world views, counter-projections based on “need” rather than “truth.”

But if film wants us to let our actions go out of our hands and know, as Cavell would say, by way of acknowledgment, then perhaps it is only natural for those committed to thinking their experience of film to react against this restraint, this reticence, and grab hold of the new aesthetic transport in a spirit of discovery and conquest. If one were to regard film solely as an artistic form of expression, then realism would become a style like any other and contingency a technique among many. However, for those who take seriously the logic of cinema's “hand-tying” injunction, the alternative to an aesthetic or political rationalization of contingency is to strive headlong for a certain ideal of knowledge or “non-knowledge”: the acknowledgment that our world is contingent despite all our efforts to make it our own. 

## Notes

- 1 See James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 5-20.
- 2 For this double-reference and resonant dialogue between philosophy and poetry on the question of post-metaphysical godlessness, I refer the reader to Heidegger's essay on Hölderlin and Rilke. Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 89-139.
- 3 See Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 5 This is why the signature can end up being, strangely enough, the work's most valuable pictorial quality, referencing the author's survival at the hands of his achievement. Hence the remarkable range in personality from modest to grandiose to highly eccentric signatures.
- 6 We may be acquainted with these tangled ideas of freedom from Jean Paul Sartre's existential account of our human condition, elaborated at great length in *Being and Nothingness*, in which humans are condemned to a freedom whose discovery entails maximum responsibility and ironically very little freedom. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 559-711.
- 7 Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 68-93.
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 435.
- 9 The definition of contingency in this context has changed very little since Aristotle grappled with it over 2000 years ago. What's more, he is also the first to broach the paradoxical nature of contingency in terms which remarkably anticipate the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics: "It can occur, that once it exists, given that it is not necessary, there will be no potential in it not to be." *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 32.
- 10 Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (London: Penguin, 2001), 12.
- 11 T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 11.
- 12 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 22.
- 13 Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 21.
- 14 Peter Geimer, "Notes from the Field: Contingency," *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 3 (2012): 352. Emphasis original.
- 15 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 119.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 80-101.
- 17 Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 11.

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- 18 Mark Ledbury's account of the paintings of Jacques-Louis David also reaches for the phrase "necessary contingency." I believe his reluctant and self-conscious tone, placing the phrase in scare quotes and tacking an apology to professional philosophy, is due to the fact that necessary contingency is actually something that conditions creation regardless of the creator, making its application to the work of an ambitious painter quite incredible. Mark Ledbury, "Notes from the Field: Contingency," 355.
- 19 See Jean Epstein, "Photogénie and the Imponderable," in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939*, vol. 2: 1929-1939, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 188-192, and Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 20 The cinematic apparatus would seem to make this preservation at least technically possible if it were not for the fact that its images degrade over time. Digital images don't degrade, you say? They are immaterial? Their mode of preservation is an exception to perishability? Let's wait and see. See Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, 17-22.
- 21 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 159.
- 22 Maxim Gorky, "On A Visit to the Kingdom of Shadows," trans. Leda Swan, quoted in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), 407.
- 23 Ibid.

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