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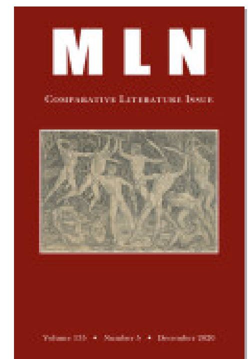

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Accidents Made Permanent: Theater and Automatism in Stanley Cavell, Michael Fried, and Matías Piñeiro

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A persistent but difficult-to-articulate idea that we have of the cinema is that its relations to other artistic media are somehow special. For example, we know that since the cinema's invention its technology and mass appeal have often led it to be regarded as uniquely deleterious to other media, and the theater in particular: a threat to the survival of older forms that has been, by different parties, both regretted and welcomed.[1] But occasionally we also encounter commentators who, not always contesting the sociological or economic factors underlying the latter observations, nevertheless choose to frame the cinema's relations to the other arts in terms of a special power for reconciliation or harmony, at least when in the right hands.

The contemporary Argentine director Matías Piñeiro gives us one variation on this idea. In a 2016 memorial tribute to the late French director Jacques Rivette (with whose films Piñeiro's are frequently compared, typically for the importance that each gives to filming theater and theatrical rehearsals), Piñeiro characterizes Rivette's

[1]See Anton Kaes's account of the different parties to the *Kino-Debatte* in Germany from 1909–1929 ("The Debate about Cinema"), as well as Eisenstein's account of his earlier view that it was "absurd" for cinema and theater to continue coexisting (*Film Form* 191–92).

works as having effected a kind of peaceful coexistence among various media: "Cultural hierarchy and snobbery evaporate in the face of power generated from these amicable duels between cinema and its neighboring arts." Piñeiro adds, "In Rivette, there is no need to translate one art form into another; his films simply display one art exposed, naked and afraid, in front of another one, a moment of encounter captured in time and the energy of this complicity projected onto the screen" ("Deaths of Cinema").

Here Piñeiro's writing has several ambitions (including a comparison between Rivette and the defense by his *Cahiers du Cinéma* mentor André Bazin of film's "impurity" with respect to other media: Bazin 63–75), but it is close enough to presenting an image of Rivette's medium as a special refuge from the problems that the other arts typically confront *away* from the cinema, such as problems about where one art ends and another begins, as well as about which art is higher and which is lower. Under Rivette's camera, that is, "music, dance, painting, theatre" (as well as novels, as in the importance of Balzac's *History of the Thirteen* to Rivette's *Out 1*, 1971) could simply *be*, obviating the need for any further questions about medium specificity or hierarchy. On the other hand, we have to keep in mind that Piñeiro is offering a piece of criticism (however convincing) about what a specific talent like Rivette could achieve in film (and, moreover, what he could achieve by filming manifestations of the other arts), not an ontological claim about what film could do "automatically," or simply in virtue of the medium it is.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, a version of the latter, stronger claim does appear in one of the most famous essays in English on modernism in the visual arts, and in terms that explicitly foreground cinema's relationship to theater. Since its publication in *Artforum* in 1967, Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" has been known for its controversial claims about minimalist (or as Fried puts it, "literalist") artists such as Donald Judd, Tony Smith, and Robert Morris. These include Fried's claims about about how these artists' works, in effecting a "kind of *stage* presence" (*Art and Objecthood* 155, henceforth *AO*) constitute "a new genre of theater" (*AO* 153), and, through their reliance on such "theatrical" effects, amount to the "negation of art" rather than a fulfillment of the principal task supposedly facing modernist artists: namely, to establish on new grounds (or to reconfigure) what had been convincing about, say, painting or sculpture of the past. And it is toward the end of these arguments that Fried offers his own version of the idea of the cinema as a *refuge*. For Fried, the task of

defeating theater, as well as the modernist task of re-constituting what had been convincing about past instances of a medium, simply have no application in film: or as he puts it, cinema is the "one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely." He adds, "Because cinema escapes theater—automatically, as it were—it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality." And he concludes, "the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge . . . means that the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art" (*AO* 164).

Only in the last few years has this passage seemed to receive serious attention, and my sense that it shares a general image with Piñeiro's description of Rivette—at least, of the cinema as a refuge from the questions about medium specificity and hierarchy that the other arts are thought to encounter—owes something to the themes explored by Daniel Morgan in a recent reflection on the fiftieth anniversary of "Art and Objecthood." There Morgan expresses disagreement with Fried's removal of cinema from the modernist problematic, while offering a compelling interpretation of Fried's reasons for doing so, based on the philosopher Stanley Cavell's understanding of cinema's relationship to modernism in *The World Viewed* (a book explicit in many of its themes' provenance in Cavell's friendship with Fried; Morgan, "Missed Connections"). Morgan focuses on Fried's additional statement that "movies in general, including frankly appalling ones, are acceptable to modernist sensibility whereas all but the most successful painting, sculpture, music, and poetry is not" (*AO* 164); and he connects this with Cavell's statements that, for at least most of cinema's history, while other media have been unable to take their traditions for granted, the movies could convincingly draw on their prior conventions, rendering cinema "the one live traditional art" (*The World Viewed* 15, henceforth *WV*). (If this does not quite explain why even "appalling" films can be acceptable to modernist sensibility, it would at least explain why that sensibility allows itself a certain indiscriminateness with regard to film: *WV* 5–6, 13–14) Therefore, on Morgan's interpretation of Fried, the "absorption" or "refuge" that cinema provides is not so much what those words might immediately suggest—cinema's special capacity for kinesthetic bombardment, lulling us into a kind of oblivion—but rather a refuge from the kinds of *questions* about its past that arise for other, modernist, media. And this emphasis on cinema's "automatically" drawing on its past conventions, and the supposed guarantee of its audience's absorption in doing so, also suggests an immediate response to Fried, developed by Morgan:

that the history of cinema itself—including the history of Hollywood, at least as far back as Griffith and DeMille—is in fact the history of self-conscious and critical evaluations of what came before (in that very medium).[2]

So far, then, we appear to have little reason to think that there is something in the "nature" or "ontology" of cinema to effect what Piñeiro says was Rivette's specific achievement in filming the other arts. Nevertheless, when it comes to understanding Fried, there are still questions here, including about the extent to which his idea of cinema's refuge from questions about its past conventions *is* facilitated by a picture of cinema as oblivion- or lull-inducing kinesthetic bombardment.[3] And perhaps most importantly, before we can let go of Fried's statement, there are still questions about why Fried needs to express cinema's protection from modernist questions in terms of its escaping *theater*—beyond the obvious reason that "theater" is one of his principal terms of criticism for minimalist art. After all, we can take a case like Walter Benjamin, who in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" is at least as concerned as Fried is about differences between cinema and theater (32, 35). But when it comes to the possibility of cinema's automatically escaping the problems associated with an older medium in modern conditions, Benjamin devotes some of his most evocative passages to *painting*, and to how the cinema avoids the latter's problems with providing "an object of simultaneous collective reception" (36; cf. Morgan,

[2]In his brief but very illuminating remarks on Fried's statement, Martin Shuster focuses on Fried's notion of "objecthood," as well as the Heideggerian notion of the "world" that he reads in *The World Viewed*. Shuster points out that, for Fried, when a work evades the modernist responsibilities of reconstituting past conventions on new grounds it is thereby removed from the world and its situating contexts: "uncertain, exactly incapable of bearing its presentation as a work of art" (36); and yet this is a problem that films can be seen to escape through their special capacity to project the world itself: "The screening of a film bars the possibility of 'objecthood,' for there is no object there, but only a *screen*, that is, a world" (38). Nevertheless, in the end Shuster also disagrees with the early Fried (he says, "the ontological qualities of film guarantee the *possibility* of worldhood, but they don't guarantee a world"; 40; cf. Fried, *Why Photography Matters* 50), and his framing even allows us to imagine an expansion of Morgan's objection: that just as film history is filled with attempts to reconstitute past conventions on new grounds, it is also filled with cases of failed, or "de-worlding," orientations to the medium's past. (Thus, it is not difficult to think of films that attempt to claim the powers of 1950s melodrama but without anything like the careful attention to that inheritance shown by, say, Fassbinder's *Ali*, 1974.)

[3]In returning to this passage from "Art and Objecthood" over four decades later, Fried invokes the notion that a movie audience "loses itself" or "forgets itself." (He is there connecting that passage to some characterizations of movie audiences by Jeff Wall: *Why Photography Matters* 12–13; cf. 371n33, *Four Honest Outlaws* 183.)

"Modernist Investigations" 222, 225). Thus, although Fried insists that "there is no doubt but that a phenomenology of cinema that concentrated on the similarities and differences between it and stage drama—e.g. that in the movies the actors are not physically present . . . would be rewarding" (*AO* 171n20), we still await an understanding of how differences between theater and cinema might be relevant to Fried's or anyone else's sense (even if mistaken) that the cinema is protected from at least a certain range of self-conscious and critical questions—from which the theater is paradigmatically *not* protected.

The differences between theater and cinema that Fried points to, as well as the task of a "phenomenology of the cinema that concentrated" on these differences, will be recognizable to readers of *The World Viewed,* published by Cavell four years after Fried published "Art and Objecthood"; just as some of the features of theater Fried mentions will be recognizable to readers of Cavell's earlier essays on Beckett's *Endgame* and Shakespeare's *King Lear,* which Fried indeed cites as influences on his essay (*AO* 172n23). My contention in the first part of this essay is that these writings by Cavell, taken together, constitute a worked-out vision, concentrated on these kinds of differences, of what it is for cinema to escape theater. To make this claim more tractable, I will focus on one difference between these media to which Cavell gives special attention: what he calls the "ontological fact" that "two screenings of the same film bear a relation to one another absolutely different from the relation borne to one another by two performances of the same play" (*WV* 229).[4] I will consider how, even if the sense of cinema's escaping theater (yielded by this difference between the two media) cannot validate Fried's notion of cinema's escaping modernism, we can nevertheless understand Cavell's resulting picture of cinema (as projecting a world closed to human agency) as an especially vivid figure or symbol of what it would be to escape the modernist problematic, if such a thing were ever possible.

I think that this reading can cast a new light on recent developments that would otherwise seem to limit the contemporary interest of Fried's original statement. On the one hand, Fried himself, who in recent years has been writing on film and video art from the per-

[4]Cavell adds: "I mean two performances of the same production of a play. This is the same fact as that a screening of a film is not a performance of it" (229). In discussing below the "fact of variability" in theater, I will focus on its restricted formulation (having to do with variability among performances of the same production), though I will occasionally need to move between it and its unrestricted formulation (including variability among different productions of the same play), as both are relevant to theater's peculiar way of requiring exercises of human agency at each moment.

spective of notions of *absorption* and *theatricality*, has raised questions about his earlier talk of what cinema could do "automatically" (*Four Honest Outlaws* 182) and is no longer concerned to defend a strong claim about medium specificity as the source of artistic value (204).[5] But, on the reading proposed here, the original power of Fried's statement consists precisely in the idea of the cinema as a symbol of relief from medium-specific worries.[6] On the other hand, if our way into these views is Cavell's writing on cinema's escape from theater's variability across performances, that entry would seem limited by the contemporary dominance of *digital cinema*, and the variability and interactivity that characterizes "new media" (Manovich 36–45). And yet it may be exactly under the pressure of questions about what cinema is in the "digital age" that we might turn for guidance to considerations of its relations to theater, especially if what results is, again, a symbol of relief from those sorts of worries. In the second part of this essay I will argue that something like the latter thought is central to the recent Shakespeare-inspired films of Matías Piñeiro, whose proximity to Fried's concerns (in his writing on Rivette) I have already noted. By focusing on *Viola* (2012), a digitally photographed film drawing on a medley of Shakespeare plays that Piñeiro had previously arranged and directed, I will show how these interrelations between media inform Piñeiro's rendering of his characters' (romantic, erotic, economic) interrelations; and how the result is that this figure—of cinema as escape from the questions urged by theater—itself becomes a way of making sense, or going on, within film.

Part 1. Cavell and Fried on Cinema's Escaping Theater

1.1. If we want to understand why the relations between cinema and theater should figure importantly in Cavell and Fried's conceptions of modernism, it might make sense to work somewhat backwards: that is, from Cavell's remarks at the end of the second edition of *The World Viewed* on the difference in the relations between two screenings of the same film and two performances of the same play. (That Cavell

[5]Nevertheless, Fried says that "the basic idea [in his original statement about cinema] still seems to me right" (*Four Honest Outlaws* 182; see also *Why Photography Matters* 13). Diarmuid Costello has argued that the early Fried's views on medium specificity were in any case in tension with his anti-essentialist views on modernism ("On the Very Idea").

[6]I have not had the opportunity to bring into consideration a similar reading by Kathleen Kelley, which appeared just before this essay went to print. But I recommend her account of the "partial collapse of the stakes of medium specificity" in Cavell and Fried (61).

brings the book to a close with these "ontological remarks" suggests something of their importance for him.[7]) The immediate context is Jean Renoir's treatment of the theater in *The Rules of the Game* (1939): remarking on that film's "pervasive theme of 'accident,'" Cavell says that "In a theater, the actors appear in person; it is part of the latent anxiety of theater that anything can happen to break the spell—a cue missed, a line blown, a technical hitch. The abyss between actor and audience is not bottomless, unless convention is bottomless." In contrast, in the cinema, "the actors are not present in person and the screen is metaphysically unreachable; the abyss between actor and audience is as bottomless as time." The cinema does not thereby exclude accidents, but rather, in its nature as an automatic medium, "everything caught by film is accident, contingency. Then one must equally say that every accident on film becomes permanent . . . ." (229).

These closing remarks indeed rehearse claims made in the chapters constituting the first edition of *The World Viewed*, such as about how a filmmaker, in finishing a work, "releases it to multiply itself" (122); and about how in the theater it is by convention that we are said not to share the same space as the performers; whereas, when it comes to film, it is only by accident of time and place (rather than by law of convention) that we were not ourselves caught by the camera (155). Each of these claims of course needs further elaboration. First, we need to recognize that we do tolerate a degree of variability between prints, copies, and projections derived from the same source film: scratches, hairs, mechanical interruptions, and more recently glitches, as well as variations across video and streaming formats.[8] Moreover, we need to take into account that theatrical conventions do not in fact render unbreachable the division between actors and audience, that not every communication between these spaces is an interruption, and that part of the variability across performances that these conventions must tolerate include those affected by changes in the audience's palpable mood, or a look or gesture that a spectator gives to a performer.

[7]Similar ontological remarks on this difference between film and theater appear in two essays written by Cavell in the years following "More of *The World Viewed*" (the 1974 essay reprinted in the book's second edition and containing the discussion of Renoir): "On Makavejev on Bergman" (*Themes Out of School* 109–110) and "Cons and Pros: *The Lady Eve*" (*Pursuits of Happiness* 52). It is a theme he very briefly returns to three decades later in *Cities of Words* (402–3).

[8]For a highly convincing account of the aesthetic interest of such variations in "noise" across projections, see Frank, *Frame by Frame* 44–73. Accounts of the variability involved in digital reproducibility, particularly image compression, include Manovich 54–55 and Steyerl.

What Cavell is ultimately getting at is that performance, in requiring exercises of human agency at every moment, thereby invites that variability (across performances) that is internal to human agency; whereas film, when it automatically captures and then reproduces exercises of human agency, afterwards tolerates only those accidents (scratches, glitches) internal to the automatic mechanism itself. As I alluded to earlier, this is a concern that Cavell shares with Walter Benjamin (32; *Pursuits of Happiness* 266–68). But not every writer on these topics has been impressed by the difference between film and theater that Cavell emphasizes.[9] For example, in her essay "Film and Theatre," Susan Sontag says, "With respect to any *single* experience, it hardly matters that a film is usually identical from one projection of it to another while theatre performances are highly mutable" (Sontag 31). Nevertheless, the *actualism* or *internalism* informing Sontag's emphasis on the "*single* experience" would be difficult to sustain. This is not only because it would appear to exclude as aesthetically significant a well-known play's attempts to draw on associations with past performances of it (perhaps the most common way in which theater calls attention to the *fact of variability*),[10] but also because it would appear to exclude what Cavell calls the "latent anxiety of theater": that, with each performance, there is no telling how things might not go according to plan. That is, that things might have gone otherwise (relative to other manifestations of the work) is essential to the "*single* experience" of a play in a way that it is not for a single experience of a film.[11]

What I am calling the *fact of variability* can also present a set of problems in theater. Some of these connect to the themes of "The

[9]Noël Carroll is onto much the same phenomena when he notes that "even if theatrical performances and film performances may both be said to be tokens, the tokens in the theatrical case are generated by interpretations, whereas the tokens in the film case are generated by templates" (67). But though Carroll thinks this difference reveals a necessary condition for being a "moving image" (in his sense), his remarks on its aesthetic significance are mostly limited to the observation that, therefore, the screening of a film (unlike the performance of a play) is not of itself an "artistic event" (70).

[10]Sontag's statement is ambiguous between what I above called the restricted and unrestricted formulations of the fact of variability in theater.

[11]Of course, what films can do is generate anxiety through the projection of those scenarios in the theater that contribute to that medium's "latent anxiety" (just as they can generate anxiety and suspense about whether any projected exercise of human agency will "succeed," by whatever terms are of interest). And, as even repeated viewings of Cassavetes's *Opening Night* (1977) demonstrate, this can involve not just the anxiety (familiar from backstage dramas) about whether the show will come off, but also a complex range of emotions centered on the improvisations that result when things do not go according to plan; the uncertainties over what is scripted and what is the unplanned irruption of a performer's own pathos; as well as the varying communications of emotion between audience and performer (Carney 261–62).

Avoidance of Love" (Cavell's essay on *King Lear*), and include the way in which the bare possibility of things having gone otherwise (relative to other manifestations of the play) can give rise to a kind of skepticism, or a distancing from the proceedings on the stage. For example, while watching a performance of *Lear*, a sense of who Lear *is* might elude us, insofar as we are inclined to keep in mind that (apart from his thousands of past incarnations) Lear has manifested himself in *this* body several times this week, each time with slightly different emphases and inflections (and seeming to respond to varying moods among the audience). Perhaps we have even been present for more than one of those incarnations in this same space, and after a systematic accounting of such differences between performances we might be inclined to say that they cancel each other out, and that all Lear could ever be is a *role*. But then we have reached the difficulty of understanding how a mere role—thinking of something like third base, or public defender—could ever be anything other than an institutional fact to be navigated around, let alone how a mere role (as opposed to the person occupying it) could ever make a claim on our powers of identification.[12]

1.2. At a memorable point in "The Avoidance of Love" Cavell remarks on our anxiety about what we could possibly say to someone who did not understand the procedures of theater (who would, for example, run up to try to save Desdemona from Othello; *Must We Mean What We Say?* 326–31, henceforth *MWM*). And a related anxiety concerns what we could say to someone who, understanding those procedures perfectly well, nevertheless manages (say, through obsessive concentration on the fact of variability) to think themselves out of a significant relation, or identification, with the characters presented before them. Of course, it is often the mark of a successful or moving performance to put such thoughts, including about the fact of variability, out of mind, and to draw us into the immediate proceedings. But Cavell's essay's emphasis on the theater as a potential site for *avoiding acknowledgment* reminds us that it could just as well be a response to a moving performance—for example, to the difficulties of seeing Lear's shame incarnated before us—to want to take refuge in these thoughts' occluding effects. The fact of variability is something that we, as uneasy spectators, can hide behind.

Also, it is consistent with these observations that for much of its history western theater could rely, not just on drawing the audience

[12]Or our powers of "engagement," to use Murray Smith's more encompassing term (*Engaging Characters*). Similar questions about repeated instances of a theater actor's performance arise in Raúl Ruiz's *Poetics of Cinema* 65–8.

into the immediate proceedings, but also on the audience's willingness to suspend disbelief arising from the fact that the proceedings are just one among many, each inevitably different: and this may indeed be what Sontag is depending on in saying that the fact of variability makes no difference to the "*single* experience" of a play. But it is characteristic of modernist conditions (as both Cavell and Fried understand them) that what was once taken for granted in traditional manifestations of a medium must continuously be re-earned: and, if modernist theater finds that it cannot, without dishonesty or bad faith, re-earn the conviction (say, around ignoring or suppressing the fact of variability) it had previously enjoyed, that too must be made explicit ("acknowledged") in the play or performance. Thus, in his reading of Beckett's *Endgame,* Cavell responds to Beckett's making explicit that the proceedings before us are just one among many, that "Over and over we are shown that everything that is happening has happened before" (*MWM* 148); and that this is central to the play's deliberate rendering of Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell as abstractions or mere roles, as "no more characters than cubist portraits are particular people" (*MWM* 131).[13] Another example is Brecht, who was impressed by the special possibilities supposedly available in Chinese theater to shock audiences through unexpected variations within gestures fixed over generations (in contrast with the easy acceptance of variability he found in western theater; Brecht 175). And he too can be understood as aiming to shock his audiences through his open declaration of the fact of variability—through dispelling any illusions that the performance is but one among many—together with the other forms of explicitness that Cavell, in discussing Brecht, describes as "wedging the mutual consciousness of actor and audience between the actor and his character" (*WV* 111).

I have brought up these problems arising for the fact of variability in theater—that concentration on it can effect a distance between audience and character, a distancing that some modernist theater openly declares—partly because they touch on some of the characterizations of theater central to "Art and Objecthood," such as Fried's understanding of minimalist art as *theatricalizing* both in the effects of its repetitions and in the distance it creates between work and beholder

[13] I do not think this is always correct as a characterization of cubist portraits—Picasso's portrait of Ambroise Vollard (1910) is highly individualizing—but Cavell's point is perfectly clear.

(157, 166).[14] In addition, I have brought up these problems because they allow for an immediate understanding of how cinema, in escaping the fact of variability, also escapes these problems (at least in not having these problems forced on it, as can a play), and therefore, in its character as an automatic medium, escapes a certain sense of theater. Even when there exist multiple cuts of the same film (whether or not they enjoy the same degree of authorization by the director), each cut, once finished, settles with relative decisiveness questions about its future projections—a power that no finished manifestation of a play has over its future performances. Therefore, a cut of a film "escapes theater" at least to the extent that it is in that way singular or invariable. (The comparative indeterminacy that results across variations in theatrical performances also helps to locate what in the actual practice of theater might inform Fried's associating the latter with "inexhaustibility" and "resistance to closure": *AO* 45, 165–67; cf. *Another Light* 264–65.[15])

It is best understood as an extension of these points about the differences between film and theater, not as a reconsideration of them, that Cavell (also toward the end of his reading of *The Rules of the Game*) imagines a possible change in practice, saying, "A theater director might invite audiences only to 'rehearsals'; a movie director might insist upon showing only 'rushes'" (*WV* 229). That is, calling performances "rehearsals" would not eliminate the fact of variability in theater, but would on the contrary explicitly declare it. And while only showing "rushes" might expose audiences to multiple takes, someone (or something) would nevertheless need to select what is shown at those rushes (even if the selection is indiscriminate); therefore—despite the tentative spirit of the presentation—the normal relation between takes and public screening would remain.

Nevertheless, what is nearly always partial or variable across multiple screenings are our subjective relations to the same film: "one is always a different spectator," as Jacques Rivette put it (Rosenbaum, Sedofsky, and Adair). Sometimes, as Berys Gaut notes, this can be the effect of

[14]On these distancing effects, see Melville (61). Note that the early Fried's medium-specific understanding of the sources of "quality and value" in the individual arts would help explain why he is opposed to the distancing effects of minimalist works (in the plastic arts) but seemingly quite open to those effects in the theater itself (particularly as practiced by Brecht and Artaud) (*AO* 163, 164, 171n19, 172n23).

[15]See also Annette Michelson's response to these passages by Fried (15–17), and her implicit extension of Fried's talk of modernist works as "wholly manifest" (*AO* 167), in contrast with theater's "inexhaustibility," to the "New Dance" of Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer, among others (35–37).

viewers' coming to appreciate how their attention was manipulated on an earlier screening (251). And recently George M. Wilson, in describing a viewer's possibly varying experience of the emotions expressed in a closeup of Octave across multiple screenings of *The Rules of the Game*, goes as far as saying that "there has been a change in the 'core' content of what the viewer has imagined seeing from one showing to another. The very look of Octave's face, as the viewer imagines it each time, has changed" (*Seeing Fictions in Film* 158). But even a formulation as strong as Wilson's *presupposes* the conception of a film as itself escaping variability that I think is Cavell's fundamental concern: in order for us to speak at all about my "imagining seeing" different contents in a closeup of Octave, we must suppose that it is indeed the same closeup (allowing for questions about how we count such things across different prints and physical supports). And in fact these observations allow us to render more precise the way in which films can escape the problems associated with the imposition of variability (across performances) in theater. It could never have been that our subjective relations to a film were invariable, but rather that it is available to the medium to escape the compounding of problems in those relations (thinking of the "abstracting" or "distancing" effects I described across multiple performances of *King Lear*) when the object to which we are related is not something singular, to which we can return, but (as in multiple performance of the same play) itself variable.

1.3. These ways in which film escapes the fact of variability are related to two further contrasts between film and theater to which Cavell devotes his attention. The first is Erwin Panofsky's point, which Cavell expands on, that whereas the characters in a play can be said to enjoy an existence prior to any particular performance, "The character in a film . . . lives and dies with the actor. It is not the entity 'Othello' interpreted by Robeson or the entity 'Nora' interpreted by Duse, it is the entity 'Greta Garbo' incarnate in a figure called Anna Christie . . . ." (Panofsky 28, quoted in *WV* 27). Of course franchises and literary adaptations complicate the sense in which a film character "lives and dies with the actor," and Cavell later puts the point more delicately by saying that "the distinction between actor and character is broken up on the screen" (*WV* 175; cf. Benjamin 31). But it is notable that we already touched on the contrasting separability of actor and character in the theater when considering how attention to the fact of variability can invite attention to the transpersonal and trans-temporal role rather than its particular manifestation. In contrast, film typically escapes that consequence, and to that extent "escapes theater," insofar

as it is specially capable of giving priority to a particular manifestation of a role (or set of such manifestations); and it can do this not only through the camera's special capacity to capture the expressions (including non-voluntary expressions) of particular human beings, but also through the medium's special capacity to reproduce those expressions indefinitely.[16] Thus, even when the camera may have captured an actor's deliberate fulfilling of a role, none of the future projections available (unlike future performances of a play) depend on a further such role-fulfillment.

Second, Cavell typically associates theater with the temporal present and film (as well as photography more generally) with the temporal past (*WV* 23, 25–26, 210–11, 214). These associations have little or no bearing on either medium's capacity to represent certain time periods, whether past, present, or future. (History and science fiction are available to both media, even if they might mean different things in each.) Rather, the sense in which a play's tense must be present concerns the fact that we, as spectators, are "present . . . at what is happening" (*MWM* 338): the performance could not be happening unless human agents kept it going, and this includes not only the performers but also the spectators, on whom the play depends at least in the negative sense of their not breaking the conventions by, say, crossing over the footlights. In contrast, Cavell says, "In viewing a movie my helplessness is mechanically assured: I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory)" (*WV* 26). Pointing out that a film's proceedings are already settled or determined before its projection (even if just before or in the course of projection, as with experiments in live editing) is in essence just another way of saying that film escapes the fact of variability. And this is notable because it allows us to see how cinema's escaping theater is not just a matter of its escaping certain problems and questions typical of theater, but is also a matter of its expanding our powers of expression, allowing for a distinctive sense of *pastness* typically unavailable in the theater.

[16]This sort of idea, that in the theater actors' non-voluntary expressions do not have the same meaning as when they are captured and reproduced by the camera—centered on the fact that a theater actor must project themselves into a role, rather than be projected—may be something that Cavell develops from his reading of Bazin's two-part essay "Theater and Cinema," cited twice in *The World Viewed*: 232n7, 233n15. It particularly seems to lie behind Bazin's statement that "There is no such thing as a 'slice of life' in the theater" (Bazin 89). For discussion of themes related to the camera's ability to capture an individual's non-voluntary expressions, see Moran, *Philosophical Imagination* 88–100; as well as Cavell, *Cities of Words* 198–207 and *Cavell on Film* 115–33.

Cavell's conception of cinema's temporality is not always easy to countenance, especially when approached from the perspective of writers (like Christian Metz) who think that cinema's essential difference from still photography lies in its communication of *present movement* (Metz 3–15).[17] But the contrast with theater helps to bring out Cavell's core thought, something effectively illustrated in the closing scene of the film that I will discuss at length in the second part of this essay, Matías Piñeiro's 2012 film *Viola*.[18] Toward the end of Piñeiro's film, a scene between the titular character and her boyfriend Javier leads into Viola's offscreen narration of the subsequent decline in their relationship, something facilitated (she tells us) by her later introducing Javier to Cecilia, the same theater actress with whom we had earlier seen him exchanging glances from a theater audience, affecting her performance in a medley of Shakespeare plays. The fact that this is the only such narration in the film and that it appears just before the closing credits has the effect of rendering the events of the film irretrievably past or lost (at least from the perspective of Viola, who now emerges as potentially the narrator, or fantasizer, of even those scenes in which she did not appear), as well as of imbuing her singing a silly song with Javier over the closing credits with a melancholy it would not otherwise have. It is crucial to the interest of this effect (especially in the context of Piñeiro's film) that reproducing it in the theater would face peculiar challenges, and not just because the same actor cannot be at once on stage and off stage (which might be remedied through an audio recording). Rather, any intended effect of such irretrievable pastness or lostness in the theater would be in tension with the fact that something must still be happening among the actors in front of us—they must be actively keeping the proceedings going—in order for there to be any effect on the stage at all. Of course, theater has its own ways of rendering significant that our helplessness before the proceedings is assured by the conventions of theater (something whose importance for the performance of tragedy Cavell develops in "The Avoidance of Love"; *MWM* 337–44). But a major aspect of cinema's escaping theater may be its special capacity (which Piñeiro exploits) to escape theater's absolute dependence on "what is happening" (thus

[17]In *Camera Lucida* Barthes also emphasizes differences in the temporalities of cinema and still photography (55, 89–90), though his views on cinema's ability to communicate a "melancholic" pastness are more equivocal (79). For more on temporality in *The World Viewed*, including the contrast with theater's temporality and Cavell's difference from Metz, see Morgan, "Modernist Investigations" 223, 229–32, 239.

[18]My sense of the importance of this closing scene owes much to Aaron Garrett's writing about *Viola* ("A Cinematic Epilogue's the Thing").

accounting for the fact of variability) and to declare the film's events lost or closed even while we are watching them.

1.4. Part of what is attractive about interpreting Cavell as thinking that an escape from the problems of variability in theater figures as a characteristic *option* for film is that it allows that filmmakers might only partially take that option (though doing so might not result in "movies" in Cavell's sense: *WV* 103). This would then allow for the full spectrum of mixtures of performance and projection (and introductions of variability across projections) that, though they were never among Cavell's specific concerns, were already flourishing in art spaces by the time he published *The World Viewed*.[19] In addition, we find that even narrative films can choose to introduce their own kinds of variability (between repeated components of the film, as opposed to between projections). This includes repeating scenes with variations (not always declaring whether any version is more "real" or privileged, or whether those different versions can be resolved into different characters' perspectives or fantasies) in order communicate something about chance or hypothesis, as in certain films by Hong Sang-soo (*The Day He Arrives*, 2011; *Right Now, Wrong, Then*, 2015) and in Piñeiro's *The Princess of France* (2014, the film following *Viola* in his series of Shakespeare films). It can also include efforts to make explicit a narrative film's typical dependence on multiple takes of the same scene (before it is completed), as in the two takes of Kate and Norman Mailer at the opening of Godard's *King Lear* (1987).

Sometimes these repetitions-with-variations can be understood as communicating the effect of a narrator's or an "implied filmmaker's" revisions (cf. Wilson, *Narration in Light* 126–44), but they can also be understood as having the equally self-reflexive, modernist ambition of relating the medium of cinema to phenomena associated with theater, or of experimenting with what it is to put those phenomena on film. For example, in Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974) repetitions-with-variations characterize each presentation of the "film-within-the-film" (often referred to as *Phantom Ladies over Paris*) that by magic Céline (Juliet Berto) and Julie (Dominique Labourier) alternately enter into, swapping the very same role. And just as that

[19]In *Expanded Cinema* (published in 1970, the year before the first edition of *The World Viewed*) Gene Youngblood says that in "real-time multiple projection, cinema becomes a performing art" (387). Also in roughly that same period introductions of variability across projections were understood to play a role in militant political organizing: in their important 1969 manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema," Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino say of their revolutionary *film acts* that across projections "the possibility of introducing variations, additions, and changes is unlimited" (249).

"inner" film gradually comes to take on further aspects of theater (including curtain calls and the applause of an unseen audience), by the time we arrive at Rivette's film's closing shots (and their renewal of the film's opening shots, with Céline and Julie swapping roles yet again) such repetitions-with-variations have come to bleed into the "outer" film as well. In that way, aspects of theater, particularly those connected with variability across performances, are shown to determine global features of the film's narration. (Another factor is the extent to which that narration can be understood as determined by Céline and Julie's shared games of *make-believe*, a notion whose significance for Cavell I will soon return to.)[20]

Therefore, once we focus on Fried's notion of cinema's escaping theater, we have (thanks to Cavell), a convincing idea of what that would mean, centered on cinema's option for escaping the fact of variability, but one that appears quite unmoored from Fried's idea of cinema's escaping modernism. And, to raise an additional worry for the early Fried, this is an idea that, through particular filmmakers' acknowledgment of just those relations with theater, appears to make possible a distinctive kind of modernist cinema (even just within the category of traditionally projected narrative films).[21] Or rather: our focus on cinema's option for escaping the fact of variability validates no stronger version of Fried's claim than the idea that cinema, to the extent it takes that option, escapes those terms of criticism that he and Cavell think apply to works in modernist conditions (a suspicion of fraudulence, a condemnation to either absolute success or absolute failure; cf. *MWM* 188–93; *WV* 13, 97) insofar as those terms apply to theater's ways of dealing with the fact of variability. In any case, though, saying that cinema can escape those terms of criticism as they apply to variability in theater (even while some films might seek their own kinds of variability) would be only slightly more substantial than saying that painting can escape modernism to the extent that it

[20]An excellent summary of *Céline and Julie*'s play with traditional theatrical forms is Wiles 98–111.

[21]More recently Fried has said that, in making such statements, he is "referring basically to Hollywood movies of the classic sort" (*Four Honest Outlaws* 183). But aside from Morgan's objection that it is historically inaccurate to characterize even classic Hollywood films as siloed off from modernest self-questioning, it is hard to see what aesthetically relevant criteria Fried could appeal to (in setting apart Hollywood films) that do not beg the very question (e.g. his appeal to Hollywood movies' "transparency"; 183). Fried additionally mentions the viewer's being "immersed" in a movie's "world" (182), but this is also a frequently noted feature of Rivette's films, with their long, immersive running times; indeed it is the very feature thematized in Céline and Julie's immersion in the world of *Phantom Ladies over Paris.*

escapes, say, the problems arising for tonality and atonality in music. (I say "only slightly more substantial" because certain overlaps between cinema and theater as performance-based dramatic arts should allow for contexts—for example, the question of whether to adapt a story as a film or a play—in which that "escape" could be of genuine interest, though this is still a very limited sense of "escaping modernism.")

1.5. But is that really all there is to say about the relation between cinema's escaping the fact of variability and the idea of an escape from modernism? And if so, are we then forced back into thinking that the motivating image in Fried's statement of the cinema as a *refuge* is indeed something like that of a site of oblivion-inducing kinesthetic bombardment, as opposed to any of the more elaborate ideas we have found in Cavell? Yet it is here that Cavell's association between cinema and the past—his idea that in the cinema, in contrast with the theater, we are present at "what has happened"—can be particularly illuminating. Again, for Cavell, our helplessness before the proceedings of a film is "mechanically assured": its proceedings are already closed or finished even while we are watching them unfold; the mechanism will ensure (to the degree that it can) that they will unfold the exact same way each time; and they require no more exercise of agency from spectators (unlike theater, and its required participation in conventions) than is required to operate the mechanism. We know that a medium with that power would not escape modernist conditions; but it would provide us with a symbol of what it would be to escape those conditions, if that were ever possible. That is, it would provide a contrast with circumstances in which the questions and problems of art are never perfectly closed, because we must raise them again and again with each new work, or with each new attempt to mean something.[22]

Once put this way, we can better understand Cavell's concern with other respects in which cinema, in contrast with theater, manifests a limit on (or rather, relief or escape for) the audience's agency. These include points touching on the relative importance in these media of *make-believe* (a notion that has since come to have even greater importance in philosophical accounts of audiences' relations to fictions, as a result of Kendall Walton's work: see *Mimesis as Make-Believe*) and of the mutual complicity between audience and performers that

[22]That Cavell is willing to contemplate the bare possibility (even if utopian) of escaping those conditions is suggested by his way of closing the "excursus" on modernist painting in *The World Viewed* with two quotations from Thoreau's *Walden*: "Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven?" "Who knows what sort of life would result if we had attained to purity?" (118).

can characterize theater. A seemingly incidental example appears in the second edition of *The World Viewed*, when Cavell notes that "On the stage, two trees may constitute a forest, and two brooms the two trees; for the screen, this would yield only two brooms," as well as related contrasts involving all the different meanings that in theater could be made of what in cinema is but "an empty stage with a couple of platforms on it" (*WV* 199). (In addition Cavell notes how these phenomena might be declared in theater, though we can also see it declared in modernist and postmodernist films by, say, Derek Jarman, Mark Rappaport, and Andrew Horn, whose "theatricality" partly consists in the understanding that their austere sets will, on film, be seen exactly *as sets*.)

The local context for these remarks is Cavell's defense of the ontological importance of "reality" to film (or of the illusion of reality manifested in a film's special effects) through a contrast with the ontological importance of "convention" to theater. And yet these remarks also seem informed by a further sense (related to cinema's escape from variability in theater, and its projecting a world "past") of how a film is closed to the viewer's agency. That is, the projection of a film has its meaning (if we just focus on what would figure in a strict factual account of its proceedings) *anyway*, independently of anything like the mutual complicity, or games of make-believe, between performers and audience that can appear to be all that sustains at least certain performances.[23] (And what is more, outside of those games and specific settings, it is not the sort of meaning—again, on screen, two brooms are left to be just two brooms—that it is normally within the power of film audiences to play a role in making.[24]) This, then, would be yet another place where Cavell's attention to theater, in contrast with cinema, might retrospectively clarify what in the actual practice of theater informs Fried's use of "theater" as a term of criticism: namely

[23]Metz has a somewhat similar conception of theater (as what "can only be a freely accepted game played among accomplices"; 9–10), though we can imagine Cavell interrogating the commensurability between the two media that seems presupposed by Metz's resulting distinction between theater's "weak" and cinema's "strong" impressions of reality (10; cf. *WV* 73), as well as, again, Metz's suggestion that the latter excludes an impression of pastness.

[24]Unless, as it happens, they themselves appear in the film or played a role in its production (prior to the screening). Obviously theatrical conventions and make-believe can have their effects on screenings, as when (within specific settings) they can render even screens and rear (or front) projections as extensions of the stage; this then accounts for further interesting iterations on the phenomena around *filming sets* that I mention above, such as the "theatrical" use of rear (or front) projection in Rappaport's and Horn's films, as well as in Syberberg's *Hitler* (1977) and in Straub and Huillet's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968).

(as in the sentences immediately preceding Fried's statement about cinema) theater's being dependent on, or "incomplete," without a beholder (*AO* 163–64). And this also begins to address the earlier question of why cinema and theater (rather than, for example—as is sometimes the case for Walter Benjamin—cinema and painting) should constitute our two axes for understanding modernism in the arts. Cinema (and perhaps also still photography, though the notion of an "audience" does not traditionally have the same purchase in the latter as it does in former) figures for us as the paradigm of an art marked by automatic limits on our games of collaborative meaning-making, whereas theater is our paradigm of an art that might be sustained by nothing but those games.

What remains, then, is to connect that image of theater as collaborative meaning-making (between audience and performer) to a conception of modernism. But such an idea is not unusual. For example, we find it in a 1975 essay by Jonathan Rosenbaum, originally published in *Sight and Sound*, on the improvisatory qualities of Robert Altman's films to that date (and in which, incidentally, Rivette's contemporary experiments are an important point of comparison). There Rosenbaum says, "Central to the concept of modernism in all the arts is the idea of collaboration—the notion that artist and audience conspire to create the work in its living form, that the experience of making it is in some way coterminous (if far from identical) to the experience of hearing, seeing, or reading it" (91). Since Rosenbaum means for something in this description to apply to the films of Altman and Rivette, we would now seem to be very far from Fried's idea of cinema as a refuge from modernism. And yet—allowing that Rosenbaum appears to have in mind especially broad senses of "collaboration" and "experience of making," ones not obviously touching on what would constitute the strict *contents* of the proceedings of, say, a play or a film—if we were to ask what might contrast with the circumstances Rosenbaum seems to be describing, we would likely arrive at something very much like Cavell's description of cinema (in its relation to theater). That is, we would arrive at something comprising a limit on the audience's agency, or their complicity in the constitution of the proceedings. In other words, the cinema would be our natural symbol for an escape from modernism. And this is not only because of the specific issues around cinema's escape from theater's fact of variability, but also because of the general attractions of thinking of modernism as informed by the continual need to re-open questions (about our grounds for getting

through to one another, thus maintaining a role for the other) with each new attempt to mean something, or with each new "performance."

That sort of need typically elicits Cavell's ambivalence: indeed, it is the occasion for the dilemma with which he concludes the first edition of *The World Viewed*. There Cavell notes something unsettling about film's presentation of a world complete without me—it suggests that the world does not need me, or could forget about me: "So there is reason for me to want the camera to deny the coherence of the world, its coherence as past" (*WV* 160). That wish again recalls Rosenbaum's description of modernism, and the related idea of a world (or a work) as appealing to the need for my collaboration in it. On the other hand, Cavell says, "there is equal reason to want it affirmed that the world is coherent without me. That is essential to what I want of immortality: nature's survival of me." Though it might seem that Cavell finally settles on that last wish, a broader perspective makes the dilemma seem inexorable. After all, the idea of unending participation—of a continual need to re-open questions about how to get through to others—is connected to what Cavell once called in a much-quoted passage (there discussing the later Wittgenstein's conception of language, and Wittgenstein's undoing of expectations that the grounds of intelligibility are settled outside of exercises of human agency) a vision "as difficult as it is (because it is) terrifying" (*MWM* 52). It is crucial to Cavell's understanding of cinema's mythology that it can provide a contrasting vision, one in which (even if only in a vision) the responsibility for projecting the world is "out of our hands" (*WV* 102). A question Cavell therefore leaves us with is whether that vision—of a world projected as already closed—has it own terrors, or whether it too is grace.

Part 2: Piñeiro's *Viola* and Cinema's Interrogation by Theater

2.1. But what is left of this mythology of cinema, in its relation to theater, under contemporary conditions of digital viewing? Can any of it survive the undeniable prevalence of such phenomena as interactive digital media, viewer-generated content, real-time playback, and virtual reality? How seriously can we take the idea of contemporary cinema's escaping variability—when it is definitional of "new media," as Lev Manovich has put it, that its objects are "variable," "mutable," and "liquid" (36–45)?[25] One reason why, in approaching these questions,

[25]In the course of responding to some of Manovich's formulations, Rodowick gives expression to the tension between something in this mythology and our ideas of digital

we should pay close attention to Matías Piñeiro's recent work is that his films not only draw on this mythology (in ways that I will argue for in this part of the essay), but that their ways of doing so make it seem that that mythology is exactly necessitated by, and its recognition facilitated through, something in contemporary digital filmmaking.

Born in Buenos Aires in 1982 and now based in New York City, where he teaches at the Pratt Institute, Piñeiro is part of an extended generation of internationally recognized filmmakers who have studied at Argentina's Universidad del Cine. He first rose to prominence with two 16mm features, *The Stolen Man* (2007) and the masterful *They All Lie* (2009), both concerned with young urbanites and their relations to the writings of the nineteenth-century Argentine statesman Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. With 2011's short *Rosalinda* (about a rehearsal of *As You Like It* along the waters of the Delta del Tigre) he began the film series for which he is now best known, *Las Shakespeariadas*, which now includes four additional features that also take their titles from Shakespeare heroines: *Viola* (2012), *The Princess of France* (2014), *Hermia & Helena* (2016), and *Isabella* (2020). Featuring a fairly consistent group of performers (particularly María Villar and Agustina Muñoz), all of the films in this series were shot in high-definition digital, and—resisting traditional notions of adaptation—all are concerned with the production, rehearsal, and translation of Shakespeare in contemporary life.

My suggestion, then, is that something in Piñeiro's turn to cinema's relations with theater in his Shakespeare films since 2011 has been brought about by the character of digital filmmaking. And we can perhaps already imagine some ways in which such a thought might go, at least when it comes to the facilitating powers of digital cinema. For example, if, as I suggested above, showing multiple takes of the same scene can be a film's way of declaring the medium's relations to theater (as in the opening of Godard's *King Lear*), then the availability of such means (if this were to come up in editing) is greatly multiplied to the extent that digital cinematography liberates a filmmaker from a limited supply of analog film stock (and thus from a limited number

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cinema when he says, "Before the digital screen, we do not feel powerless, but rather express a will to control information and to shape ourselves and the world through the medium of information" (174). Previous treatments of digital cinema as a purported problem for Cavell have tended to focus on whether his supposed "photographic realism" can survive the emergence of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and digital-image processing (Prince, "True Lies" 29–30); I think the above problems surrounding *variability* are no less significant for grappling with the contemporary interest of Cavell's "ontology of film."

of takes).[26] And yet what I think is even more central to Piñeiro's films is a particular idea of cinema's medium specificity (in its relation to theater), articulated through the questions of contemporary digital filmmaking, and an idea that makes perfect sense after an accounting of Cavell's and Fried's views on what it is for cinema to *escape* theater. That is, at yet another historical juncture marked by questions about what cinema is, relating the medium to theater serves a double function. Obviously, this includes the function of reminding us of features of cinema's specificity in comparison with another medium; but it also includes the function of relieving us of the urgency of questions about its specificity by relating it to that very medium (namely, the theater in its character as a symbol of what urges such questions on us—to return to Fried's image, as elaborated by Cavell) for which the cinema figures as a symbol of refuge or escape.

If we can find something along the lines of those thoughts in *Viola* (and I have already noted an interesting proximity between those thoughts and Piñeiro's articulation of his experience of Rivette's films), then Piñeiro, with his particular way of filming theater (under conditions of digital viewing), may have arrived at, or played a role in constituting, an "automatism" in Cavell's developed sense. Cavell famously argues that the term "automatism" not only has application to film's manufacturing or material basis, and not only to the notion of the material basis of an artistic medium as such, but also, most importantly, that it is a term appropriate for organizing the various ways of getting through to another, and of going on, within any art: including "forms," "genres," "modes of achievement," "artistic discoveries," and of course the "medium" (*WV* 32, 101–08; cf. Trahair 138). Thus, for Cavell, the task of the modernist artist is not just to produce a new instance of a medium, but to produce a new way of going on, or a new automatism, within or out of that medium (*WV* 103). That Cavell's developed sense of "automatism" is especially conducive to thinking about digital cinema—that it can allow us to understand certain continuities between digital and analog cinema, despite their distinct phenomenologies and material bases, but also that our interest in digital cinema rests on its character as a field for generating new automatisms—is a proposal closely associated with

[26]Manovich has discussed how roughly similar narrative strategies reflect the database logic (involving the preservation, classification, and retrieval of multiple variations) characteristic of "new media" (237–43). Piñeiro has himself talked about how working in digital has resulted in a proliferation of takes in his recent films, in contrast with his two earlier features shot in 16mm ("Kazik Radwanski and Matías Piñeiro").

D.N. Rodowick's 2007 book *The Virtual Life of Film.* My understanding of Piñeiro's relation to automatism depends on Rodowick's proposal but is also (non-trivially) more specific: that Piñeiro (though likely not Piñeiro alone) has tapped the potential, or the "automatism," in digital cinema for *filming theater* in order to raise, and then deflate, questions about cinema's specificity.

Fully assessing this claim would require taking into account the extent to which this automatism can be carried on, or can generate new instances, beyond *Viola* or any of Piñeiro's particular works. Thus, Cavell speaks of "automatism" in part to convey the idea of a medium's producing or *calling for* new instances, something he connects to the phenomenon of "series" in the plastic arts (*WV* 103, 107).[27] And here we should pay attention to Piñeiro's own creation of a *series* across the last decade, and that it is characteristic of the films following *Viola* in his Shakespeare series to bring into consideration, relative to both theater and digital cinema, an even wider variety of media (such as oil painting and classical music in *The Princess of France*, analog found footage in *Hermia & Helena*, and installation art in *Isabella*). Perhaps most significantly, an understanding of this automatism would also allow us to understand its apparent operation, in the recurrence of the figure of theater in digital films across the last decade, among that generation (born between the mid-1970s and early 1980s) of Argentine and Argentina-based filmmakers, most of them having worked in Buenos Aires theater, with whom Piñeiro shares circles of collaboration and influence.[28] That would have to be part of a broader story, but I think

[27]This aspect of "automatism," and especially our reticence to call something a medium if it is, or could only be, unique to one artist, is emphasized by Costello, "Automat" 844–49.

[28]That would likely include the use of theater's characteristic repetitions-with-variations across performances, in this case as a site for remembering and working through war trauma, in *Theatre of War* (2018) by Lola Arias (born in 1976), also part of an extended theatrical and video-installation project; as well as the use of home-made theater and make-believe, mixed with electronic screens, in the creation of a peculiar domestic space in *So Long Enthusiasm* (2017) by the Argentina-based Colombian director Vladimir Durán (born in 1977). It would clearly have to include Piñeiro's close collaborator, and editor of *Viola*, Alejo Moguillansky (born in 1978), who in the last decade has produced his own series of films concerned with the special difficulties of filming opera, ballet, and contemporary theater. This has culminated in Moguillansky's own suggestions about medium specificity—through juxtaposing the staging of an opera by Helmut Lachenmann with a child's repeated viewings of a DVD of Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) and entertaining the roots of all arts in the dreams and games of childhood—in *The Little Match Girl* (2017). Finally, Mariano Llinás's (born in 1975) landmark fourteen-hour *La Flor* (2018), which began filming in 2009, could be interpreted as this generation's summary statement of its discoveries during this period. Though this film's explicit treatment of theater (in its fourth episode, during a presentation of a legend involving

that a thorough consideration of *Viola* (which, from 2012, would lie comparatively early in Piñeiro's process of forming an "automatism" during this period) could provide a basis for approaching it. Since good accounts of the opening scenes of *Viola* already exist,[29] I will briefly summarize those scenes before going on to give a more detailed account of what takes place after the belated-seeming introduction of the character named Viola (María Villar): an entrance that brings to the forefront cinema's condition as an *automatic* medium, and thus its capacity for escaping theater's fact of variability, through Piñeiro's staging an "interrogation" of one medium by the other.

2.2. The first third of *Viola*'s brisk hourlong running time concerns a real-life play, in fact a medley of seven Shakespeare plays, that Piñeiro arranged and directed in Buenos Aires in 2011, *And When I Love Thee Not, Chaos is Come Again* (*Y cuando no te quiera, será de nuevo el caos*). The film opens with an actress (Sabrina, played by Elisa Carricajo) backstage before a performance, breaking up with her boyfriend Agustín by phone. We then see her in the play itself, in the role of *Twelfth Night*'s Olivia, speaking the dialogue from that play in which Viola, impersonating the messenger Cesario, attempts to cajole Olivia's love for Cesario's master, Orsino, only here Cesario is called "Bassanio," Orsino is called "Antonio," and the dialogue is mixed with lines from *The Merchant of Venice*. (Indeed the first lines of the play we hear are Olivia speaking as Shylock: "I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.") Throughout Sabrina is being watched from the audience by Agustín (Alessio Rigo de Righi), just as the actress playing Viola, Cecilia (Agustina Muñoz), is herself being watched by a stranger (Esteban Biliardi), whose stares she returns. In their dressing-room conversation following the performance, the play's four actresses focus on their experience with this sort of communication between stage and audience (and its characteristic anxieties, familiar from Cavell's writing), as well as Sabrina's reasons for leaving Agustín (related to her avowed habit in winters of "loving 'less,' of doing 'less'"). After Sabrina departs the dressing room, Cecilia hatches a scheme (expressed, fantastically, in highly rehearsed rhyming couplets) according to which she will

Casanova) is very brief, its sharing its principal cast with the theater group Piel de Lava (and its extended cast with regular actors in Piñeiro's and Moguillansky's films) makes theater throughout as much an issue as, and intertwined with, its own explorations of cinema's oldest mythologies. (This includes its opening by linking the powers of cinema with the powers of mummification, recalling Bazin 9, 14–15, and its closing by digitally reproducing the results of a camera obscura).

[29]See Ceresa as well as Garrison and Berg, though the below discussion will reveal differences in interpretation from both those commentaries.

somehow convince Sabrina of the self-centeredness of her conception of love—and of the correctness of her supposedly competing "theory" that love "depends on the other"—by herself seducing Sabrina. This is what then takes place in Sabrina's home, as they rehearse the same dialogue from the play we had earlier heard, with Cecilia flirtatiously looping the dialogue back as Sabrina attempts to press on, culminating in Cecilia's receiving Sabrina's kiss.

Already in these early scenes we see a variety of conceptions of theater at play, including that of theater as seasonal ritual (related to *Twelfth Night,* written for the period of winter feasts) and even seasonal purge (as in Sabrina's description of her winter habits). It also includes "theater" in the pejorative sense of the scripted or forced (as in the actresses' forced construal of Cecilia's expression of personal sensibility in terms of a "theory" of love, resulting in the incredible suggestion that Cecilia could communicate that theory to Sabrina by seducing her). And it prominently includes questions of *make-believe* (as in questions of what, if not the actresses' games of make-believe—perhaps recalling *Céline and Julie Go Boating*—might be controlling features of the film's narration, in order to account for such fantastic elements as Cecilia's breaking into rhyming couplets). But most importantly, these scenes also declare phenomena we have seen to be connected to theater's fact of variability, as well as what happens when those phenomena are put on film. These include how the confusing piling-on of roles within the play (Carricajo at once playing Sabrina, Olivia, and Shylock; Muñoz at once playing Cecilia, Viola, Cesario, and Bassanio) mainly results in our paying attention to *just these individuals* (whatever roles they may occupy). This then serves to declare something along the lines of Cavell's idea of theater's relative dependence on transpersonal and trans-temporal roles and the cinema's relative dependence on particular actors (or particular performances; cf. Gómez and Cruz 39, 88). Similarly, in the seduction-by-rehearsal between Cecilia and Sabrina, we see a demonstration of film's capacity to represent a rehearsal *as a rehearsal*—including, in its repetitions, as a possible site for erotic jesting—as opposed to what, in a live performance, we might see (or we might be guided by theater's conventions to see) as nothing other than the manifestation (and occasional breaking) of the actors' roles.

The film then moves to an even closer attention to questions of automatic and digital reproducibility, as from Sabrina's kissing Cecilia it cuts to box with a red "M" stamped on it, at some level evoking the "M" of Fritz Lang's 1931 film. We hear a man (Alberto Ajaka) describ-

ing what seems to be the very scene (of a kiss) we have just witnessed, at first suggesting a framing device (Garrison and Berg 238). But in fact he turns out to be telling an unrelated fictional story to Viola, who is making deliveries for "Metropolis" (evoking yet another Lang film, indeed one whose long-missing scenes were discovered in Buenos Aires in 2008), the bootleg CD and DVD business she shares with her boyfriend, Javier.[30] From this man's house Viola travels by bicycle to two more clients, as the film focuses on the logistics of delivery and of Viola's collecting debts and payments, until she arrives at Sabrina's apartment at evidently just the moment of her kiss with Cecilia. Since her delivery is for Agustín and Sabrina does not have enough to pay her, Viola then travels to Agustín's apartment, where, curiously, she outside encounters Cecilia (again, the actress playing Shakespeare's Viola in the play-wthin-the-film). They both wait for Agustín in Cecilia's car, where Viola finds the red-plastic ring used as a prop in the play (which Cecilia lets her keep), and after avowing her distance from theater-acting by saying she could never learn lines, she places her head on the car's headrest.

The remarkable scene that follows is an unbroken long-take shot within the car, whose fogged windows create the effect of a hermetic seal or a dream-screen. In the distance Cecilia and Viola recognize a mutual friend, Ruth (Romina Paula), whom they invite inside to escape the wet cold. We learn that Ruth will replace Cecilia in her role in the play, and so in order to pass the time they begin rehearsing lines we have not yet heard in this film, from Rosalind's epilogue to *As You Like It*. Viola interrupts by saying that she too knows this epilogue (despite her earlier insistence that she cannot learn lines), which she then recites nearly perfectly. This sufficiently impresses Cecilia and Ruth that they suggest that Viola herself replace Ruth once her time is up in this role. The camera has still not left its closeup on Viola's face when the two theater actresses, having offered her a role, abruptly begin a harsh interrogation of her. "Everything works out pretty easy for you," Ruth says. "You're quite passive and yet many things happen to you." Cecilia agrees: "You react." "That's horrible," Viola objects. As though this were the same issue as Viola's supposed "passivity," Ruth asks about her routine with Javier: for example, whether upon arriving home she immediately kisses him, to which Viola nods. "Always the same thing? . . . You see, completely automated," a phrase that Cecilia

[30]Piñeiro's main purpose was to base this on a real-life business called "Alphaville," after Godard's own "futuristic" city (Titze). The idea of juxtaposing rehearsals of Shakespeare with references to *Metropolis* also links *Viola* to Rivette's *Paris Belongs to Us* (1961).

repeats. In order to "stop doing what you always do" (as Ruth puts it) or to "de-automate yourself" (as Cecilia puts it), they suggest to Viola that she do nothing when Javier returns that day and wait to see if, in the best case, he goes around and suddenly kisses her: "That would mean that you can still save the relationship," Cecilia says.

Therefore, in a scene that had just drawn attention to the fact of variability in theater (through the possibility of many performers occupying the same role), two theater actresses criticize a woman identified with the cinema (thanks at least to her delivery of bootleg DVDs, though I will soon say more about this allegorical identification) for being "automated," for always doing the same thing. It is as though an escape from theater's imposition of variability were something that generated its own problems and questions (such as those surrounding the foreclosing—to a film declared finished—of a "new beginning" like that available to a new performance of a play). The scene comes to an end when Ruth spots someone named "Gerónimo" outside, opening the door not onto the street outside Agustín's apartment but (surreally) onto the very windy waters of the Río de la Plata—upon which Viola wakes, revealing everything in this long take to have been a dream.

The rest of the film concerns the fate of Viola's relationship with Javier, and terminates in the melancholic presentation of their singing a song together that I mentioned above. We learn that Javier is indeed the same member of the audience who had been staring at Cecilia during the play's performance. When he enters their apartment, Viola, now wearing the red-plastic ring that Cecilia had given her, is absorbed in listening to music on headphones—in fact, the same contemporary music that had been playing in Cecilia's car—thus raising the question of what Viola has inherited from Cecilia, and from theater-acting more generally. Following the actresses' advice in her dream, she declines to give Javier her "automated" kiss, leaving him somewhat nonplussed. Javier then hands Viola the potatoes that, we come to see, she uses to make the red "M" impressed on the business's packages (thus identifying Viola, not just with the cinema, including its digital manifestations, but also with the most ancient kind of automatic reproducibility). In the background a film faintly recognizable as Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936) is playing on a laptop. ("Tomorrow's order," she says.)

It is in this context—of comings and goings in a young couple's apartment, of evident accidents made permanent (such as someone unaffiliated with the film knocking on the apartment's door)—that Javier comes up to Viola in order to kiss her, thus fulfilling what Ceci-

lia (in Viola's dream) had said was the only sign that their relationship could have a future. And it is in this moment that Viola speaks in voiceover, describing how (despite Javier's kiss) the relationship would not last, and that Javier would gradually leave her for Cecilia. Having heard these melancholic words read over a closeup of Viola continuing to make the "M" stamps, we then see her in the apartment's "rehearsal room" sharing a song with Javier. This scene's improvisation obviously links it with the other performances (both rehearsed and improvised) that we have seen in this film, as its seemingly nonsensical lyrics relate to the questions of debt and credit that have been central since the first utterance of lines from *The Merchant of Venice*: Viola sings, "Bring me back my six hundred bucks" as, indeed, the closing credits begin to roll.

2.3. I have already noted something, beginning with Viola's delivering DVDs for "Metropolis," of her symbolic identification with the cinema (as well as other forms of technological reproducibility), including her self-characterization (via the actresses in her dream) as *reactive*, which might furthermore recall the camera in its automatic character (cf. *WV* 184, 185).[31] In addition, it could perhaps allay the worst impressions about this kind of identification (that it would have to be somehow objectifying or de-humanizing) to note that it also appears connected to Viola's capacity, special among the film's characters, for bringing proceedings to an end. This is manifested in her special command of epilogues, both in her oneiric memory of Rosalind's epilogue in *As You Like It* and her own voiceover narration, closing the film itself, and thus recalling what Cavell says (in discussing cinema's escaping theater's fact of variability) about how a filmmaker can call a work *finished* with relatively decisive consequences for its future projections, in contrast with future performances of a play.

That voiceover narration is particularly significant for how it forces a complete rethinking of the film's earlier proceedings, an idea that Garrison and Berg gesture at when they say that it reveals that "the entire movie has been a flashback" (241). But this would be a peculiar kind of flashback, since the character from whose point of view it has been so revealed does not herself appear in the film's earliest extended scenes (centered around the theater performance and the seduction-by-rehearsal). What the voiceover narration then raises is the *possibility* that these early scenes are also to be understood as from Viola's point of view, and therefore that, within the film, Viola's dream

[31]This identification with cinema is developed so consistently that it might not be too outrageous to note Viola's name's rhyming with *moviola*, the analog film editing machine.

is not the only presentation of her fantasies—among which we could perhaps include her fantasized reconstructions of the events leading up to the end of her relationship with Javier.[32]

In fact, those early scenes are strictly constituted by material we know to be accessible to Viola's consciousness, either in those scenes with her that we do see, or in what, as in her visit to the theater with Javier, where she will introduce him to Cecilia, we know from her voiceover to follow the film's explicit proceedings. And though this interpretation is hardly forced by those scenes' fantastic elements, like Cecilia's speaking in rhyming couplets, it does help us to understand something of the initially deceptive framing involved in the first client's telling Viola a story about a kiss. This not only helps to smooth the transition from Sabrina's kissing Cecilia to Viola's story, but also raises the general question of framing with respect to these earlier scenes, and whether, despite this local deception, they indeed might be fictions-within-a-fiction—that is, Viola's fantasies.

If we can understand Viola as allegorizing cinema in its automatic character, and the film itself as at least raising the question of whether its entirety can be interpreted as from her point of view, then we are better prepared for the idea that Viola is a surrogate for the film's director (cf. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* 66, 107–08; Wilson, *Narration in Light* 138–39). This is something additionally brought out by Piñeiro's peculiar kind of presence in those scenes in which Viola does not appear, which all happen to be concerned with the performance and rehearsal of a real play that Piñeiro arranged and directed: it is as though only one or the other (taking into account a director's peculiar kind of presence in their own play; cf. *WV* 229–30) must always be present in every scene. The importance of Piñeiro's having a surrogate in this film then emerges through questions about how Viola's relations to the theater (such as her interrogation by the theater actresses in her dream, and her clearly owing something to them, symbolized in her having their shared ring bestowed on her) are expressions of Piñeiro's own anxieties—having for the first time, just before this film, arranged and directed a theater play—about what he owes to the theater. (Understanding this as acknowledging a debt not only calls to mind the film's economic themes, arising from its use of lines from *The Merchant of Venice,* but also that the film's final

[32]Thus, this voiceover at least raises the question of whether *Viola* is an instance of what Wilson calls "epistemological twist films," which are "defined by the fact that global aspects of the epistemic structure of their narration are clarified, in a surprising way, only toward the end of the movie" (*Seeing Fictions* 156).

acknowledgement of live performance, manifested in Viola's shared song with Javier, occurs during its final credits, as though performance more than anything is what demands crediting.)

Therefore, this interpretation of *Viola* gets us as far as seeing how Piñeiro's concerns about his debt to theater join together with what I have proposed as one component of his "automatism" in digital filmmaking: namely, the addressing of questions about cinema's specificity (under contemporary conditions of digital viewing) by reminding us of that medium's relations to theater (including its escape from theater's fact of variability). But since considering Piñeiro's account of Rivette's films, and of course also Fried's and Cavell's conceptions of cinema's relations to theater, I have been just as interested in the possibility of a second component of that automatism, one through which examining those same relations also provides us with an image of *escape* from our anxieties about medium specificity. And that image of escape is no less manifest in *Viola*, despite being highly condensed in the film's closing moments. That is, Viola's shared song with Javier is not just a happy moment irretrievably lost, but also constitutes, in a film marked by concerns (even up to the end of this song) about cinema's debt to theater, a sign that those sorts of anxieties can, however momentarily, be set aside; and, moreover, a sign that depends exactly on our understanding of cinema as the appropriate medium for providing that kind of relief. After all, the very last words heard in this film—at the end of the closing credits—are also the very last words sung by Viola (the film's symbol of the medium of cinema, in its relation to theater, as well as the filmmaker's surrogate): "I will forget you."[33]

[33]I thank the audiences and co-panelists at three presentations I gave of an earlier version of this essay in 2019: the "Thought of Movies" colloquium at the Université Paris I - Panthéon Sorbonne (organized by Elise Domenach and Sandra Laugier), a panel on aesthetics at the V Congreso Iberoamericano de Filosofía (held at UNAM's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters), and the "Constellations of the Ordinary" colloquium at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (organized by Victor Krebs). I also received feedback from Paloma Atencia Linares, Anke Breunig, Dan Morgan, Paul Schofield, Deniz Tortum, and especially an anonymous reviewer for *MLN*, whose recommendations truly helped me to bring the essay together. For specific comments following the aforementioned presentations, I want to thank Steve Affeldt, Avner Baz, Gordon Bearn, Alice Crary, David LaRocca, Christian Martin, Richard Moran, Jean-Philippe Narboux, Gustavo Ortiz Millán, Karel Pletnick, Kate Rennebohm, and David Rodowick. My thoughts on the possible connection between Piñeiro's *Viola* and Cavell's way of concluding "More of *The World Viewed*" date way back to a 2013 conversation with Piñeiro following a screening of that film at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Patricia Marechal, who told me about the screening (and who had earlier introduced me to Lola Arias's work, mentioned above), was also an important part of that conversation. I was able to work through my understanding of Piñeiro's films in an email correspondence in

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late 2015 with Aaron Garrett, following up on his above-cited blog post on *Viola*, and around that same time with Piñeiro himself, while he was teaching at the Massachusetts College of Art. I thank Piñeiro for being a generous interlocutor about his work. This essay is dedicated to the memory of David Pendleton.

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