Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind

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The Specter of the Electronic Screen

Bruno Varela's Reception of Stanley Cavell

BYRON DAVIES

IT SHOULD BE MORE THAN MERELY CURIOUS to those approaching Stanley Cavell's film writing that his work has influenced actual practicing filmmakers. But as soon as we account for some of the most prominent instances of contemporary directors influenced by Cavell—Arnaud Desplechin, Luc Dardenne, and his former student Terrence Malick[1]—we immediately run into a certain problem with narrowness: it is easy to recall these names because they are famous European and North American directors, whose feature films are (to varying degrees) star-based, have premieres at the Cannes Film Festival, and reviews in *The New York Times*. The risk, then, is in reinforcing a certain narrowness of vision about Cavell's developed answer to his question "What is film?"[2]—a narrowness that, to be fair, Cavell did not always do his best to discourage. Thus, a related question is whether our grasp of Cavell's writing might be transformed by our sense of its reception by a filmmaker whose work is both more hidden and in a sense more publicly accessible, who employs alternative circuits of distribution and exhibition, whose output is rooted in the politics of the Global South (especially efforts in indigenous video and broadcasting), and who often withdraws from aiming to reproduce the look of celluloid and instead abounds in the feel of electromagnetic tape and electronic signals. This, I take it, is the challenge posed in understanding the Oaxaca-based Mexican filmmaker and audiovisual artist Bruno Varela as a reader of Cavell.

Bruno Varela is one of the most accomplished and productive experimental filmmakers working in Mexico today. Born in 1971 in Mexico City, where he studied Social Communication at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana—Xochimilco, Varela is a self-described "autodidact in the mysteries of the audiovisual."[3] In 1992 he began devoting himself full-time to film and video production not only in the southern state of Oaxaca, but also in Chiapas, Yucatán, and notably Bolivia, where at the beginning of his career he "provided video training for indigenous communicators."[4] During the 2006 Oaxaca uprising and takeover of city functions (including radio stations and Oaxaca's public television station, Channel 9) by the Popular Assembly of Oaxaca's People (APPO), Varela was involved with Mal de Ojo TV, a video collective that documented the protests (in which over two dozen activists were killed) and compressed and uploaded to the internet footage taken by the slain North American Indymedia journalist Brad Will. Varela's experience of Oaxaca in 2006, including his own (continually reused and repurposed) footage of the protests, is a vital part of his work to this day. Since 2006 he has been working in Oaxaca under the auspices of Anticuerpo, which he describes as an "experimental space for audiovisual production and optical phenomena."[5] In recent years, this space has also involved his young daughter, Eugenia Varela, who at only six years old and bearing a Holga digital camera was the codirector of *Mano de metate* (*Grindstone Hand*, 2018), a unique, shared audiovisual collage in which references to Chris Marker's *La jetée* (1962) figure as points for expressing a child's experience of time.[6]

To be sure, Varela has hardly escaped international attention, including through screenings and participations in shows at the Guggenheim in New York, the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, Frieze Projects, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, and the Havana Biennial. In addition, his short film *Tiempo aire* (*Air Time*, 2014), a semi-fictional travelogue bringing together footage from Bolivia, New York, Arizona, Mexico City, and various parts of Oaxaca, received the inaugural e-Flux prize, bestowed by the titular art magazine, in Oberhausen in 2015. Despite this attention at the level of elite exhibition circuits, an indelible feature of Varela's work is its public accessibility: the vast majority of his films and audiovisual experiments are available for free on his Vimeo page (at this moment numbering 223 videos), constituting a dizzying and bottomless archive for those fortunate to be sucked into its orbit.[7] And an equally important dimension of Varela's accessibility is through his teaching. In spaces like ULTRAcinema MX, the Mexican experimental film festival and yearlong audiovisual project, Varela's workshops on video, found footage, and reappropriation are memorable not only for his lively and conversational teaching style, but also for his constellation of references to philosophical and theoretical writings, thus bringing students to—and making less intimidating—Baudrillard, José Luis Brea, Deleuze and Guattari, Mark Fisher ("k-punk"), Vilém Flusser, Alexander Kluge, Pasolini, Hito Steyerl, and Tarkovsky's *Sculpting in Time*.

One can then imagine my surprise and fascination in learning that one of those references is Stanley Cavell. I had already come to know Varela during my time living in Oaxaca City from 2017 to 2018, before I was able to see his film *Monolito* at the 2019 International Film Festival of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (FICUNAM). Varela's forty-minute film astonished me for the way it links together the social history of Oaxaca with a wider mythology of fire and transformation, something that Varela in turn connects to the history of cinema (through his reappropriation of images of fire from films by Godard and Tarkovsky). But what additionally piqued my interest was the possibility of seeing *Monolito* as an approach to what I had been beginning to understand as a similar importance that Cavell gives to mythologies of fire and transformation in *The World Viewed* and related writings on film;[8] that is, I was beginning to think that Cavell's turn to images of transformation by heat and light was his way of tracing, at least figuratively, an alternative to conceptions of film's relation to the world as one of "recording" or copying.[9] I plan for this to be the focus of other writing, but the present point is that *Monolito* alone seems to provide the basis for a fresh reading of Cavell, especially one that would be outside the grip of familiar interpretations of him as a "photographic realist" in the tradition of Bazin, Panofsky, and Kracauer.[10] I then wrote to Varela to express my interest in developing these ideas, based especially on *Monolito*, and I received the very encouraging reply that he already knew Cavell's work.

The meaning of this encounter between Varela and Cavell seems worth exploring for a number of reasons: especially for Cavell's notorious mis-encounter with experimental cinema (though his late references to Stan Brakhage and the animator Suzanne Pitt, and later, deeper engagement with Chris Marker are here worth noting[11]), and also for his mis-encounter with the cinema of Mexico, Latin America, and the Global South. (Of films significant to Cavell, those approaching Mexico and Latin America are typically Hollywood films told from the perspective of North American or European characters,[12] or from a surreal North Americanization of Mexican history, as in *Viva Zapata!* [1952, dir. Elia Kazan], a film whose connection to Varela I will return to.[13]) The encounter also seems worth exploring in that Cavell's most extensive treatment of video and the electronic screen, "The Fact of Television" (first prepared for a special issue of the journal *Daedalus* on "Print Culture and Video Culture" in 1982), contains Cavell's disclaimer that he is "not undertaking to discuss the progress and results of experimental video artists."[14] I was, therefore, even further fascinated to learn from Varela that his principal exposure to Cavell was through his reading that very essay on television, which he first encountered through its reprint in the 1986 volume *Video Culture*, edited by the art historian and curator John Hanhardt. Varela's reading of this Cavell text, then, opened up the possibility of a genuinely different and possibly very illuminating way of

approaching Cavell (one not typically invited by other anthologizations of his film writing, such as the collection of chapters 3 through 6 of *The World Viewed* across the many editions of Leo Braudy, Marshall Cohen, and Gerald Mast's *Film Theory and Criticism*): namely, as a true philosopher of the electronic screen. (Moreover, approaching Cavell this way also availed some of the imaginative possibilities of encountering Cavell in a context in which photographic realism was not seriously at issue: whereas the editors of one edition of *Film Theory and Criticism* introduce those chapters by referring to Cavell's "important place in the tradition of realist film theorists,"[15] Hanhardt, who introduces his volume with an explicit rejection of photographic realism, never presents Cavell in those terms.[16])

Therefore, in order to explore these connections further, I asked Varela to write something brief about his experience of reading Cavell, which I reproduce below in my translation from Spanish.[17] At that point it was impossible to ask him to speak *strictly* from his experience of "The Fact of Television," as I had already shared with him further writing by Cavell that I thought would interest him, and which we had discussed in a video chat. These were "The Advent of Videos,"[18] "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting" (where Cavell discusses Marker's *Sans soleil* and, by allusion, his *Immemory* CD-ROM, both significant references for Varela),[19] as well as the chapters of *The World Viewed* on "The Medium and Media of Film" and "Automatism."[20] (Beyond Varela's references below to "automatism," the first sentence of the latter is echoed in his talk of "the magical possibilities of reproducing a world.") Nevertheless, even in this brief writing, the depth of Varela's reception of Cavell as a philosopher of the electronic screen is apparent, and should call our attention.

> Automatic dialogues, automatic audiovisual-writing.
>
> Would-be telepathy, metaphysical apparition manifested through a cathode tube, a television screen used as a cosmic receptor.
>
> Mediated by the Gaze of a third person who establishes a reading, an argument, permitting communication between distant objects, ideas, films, scraps of writing.
>
> In me it resonates enormously from Cavell, that intuitive intelligence for recognizing in the electronic image, the domestic ecosystem of reception and reading, the fragmentation of material and the continuity of that "new" experience in face of the screen.
>
> Thinking of video as a small form of cinema that, even in its refined miniature, has contained part of the essence of the idea—cinema conceived as a dark room spectacle.

That new possibility of viewing past cinema in a modality that allows for its analysis and dissection. The electronic box and its cathode snow as instruments of investigation of the audiovisual apparatus.

A new assemblage, a propitious territory for re-reading, for re-viewing classic cinema. Thinking of it as a much more complex apparatus than what comes from "argument" and from the first appearance of simple and transparent reading. A kind of critical cinephilia, one that finds, as many makers and thinkers of cinema of the past century have regarded it, a historical device, a repository. In its narratives, formal *dérives*[21] and techno-military developments, the cinema is the largest time capsule known in human history. It synthesizes the 20th century and possibly the beginning of the 21st.

Of great interest to us are the magical possibilities of reproducing a world, of showing the invisible, of transmitting emotions. Also of playing with the automatism and putting it to work in the direction opposed to the program. Of generating new automatisms that move in unforeseen directions, infected with failed instructions.

Cinema that aspires to be re-viewed, that asks itself if it exists as a medium or only as an idea. Or just a matter of *espectros*.[22]

Today in the midst of complex transformations in foreseeing, screens occupy even more dramatic positions within our inner lives. Uncanny traffic from the screening room to the home-school-office on screen.

Back to Cavell and his questions.

The voice in this writing will be recognizable to anyone who has seen Varela's work, particularly from the flows of poetic text and commentary that typically appear at the bottom of the screen, even down to the references to electronic apparatuses (e.g., the references to the "electronic image" in *Mano de metate* and "electromagnetic transmission" in *Monolito*). In addition, Varela's interest in Cavell's writing on watching classic cinema via the electronic screen (a theme most developed in "The Advent of Videos") reflects something of his own repurposing of images from older cinema as a form of criticism. And by approaching Cavell as a philosopher of the electronic screen, Varela also, in his penultimate paragraph, links his writing to the present ubiquity of the digital electronic screen as a communication medium during the Covid-19 pandemic.

What do we do with these thoughts? What is their place in an understanding of Cavell's writing, above all "The Fact of Television"? How do we relate them to the fact that Varela encountered that essay in a volume on "video culture" (among writers on the politics of radio and mass media like Brecht, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Baudrillard, as well as writers

on video art like Rosalind Krauss)?[23] And how might that set of influences illuminate our viewing of Varela's own films? These are the questions I will focus on for the remainder of this chapter, and in approaching them, we are faced with the possibility that Varela might change our understanding of Cavell's writing on film and television. For example, in what is presently the most important monograph applying Cavell's film writing to television, Martin Shuster remarks on Cavell's view in 1982 that television had not yet "come of age" artistically—something that Shuster thinks is no longer the case, allowing TV series to stand comparison with accomplished films.[24] The risk here, however, lies in thinking that television must become like previously existing film in order to be artistically ambitious. But what if what, in 1982, Cavell called the "material basis" of television was already potential enough—and that this is what an artist like Varela is developing in turning television into film, and in so doing changing our very idea of what film can be?

* * * *

In approaching these questions, we will need to rehearse the fundamental claims of "The Fact of Television." We will also need to figure out what remains intelligible to us about an essay reflecting on what television had been in the United States just up to 1982, and therefore just up to the rise of cable TV and VHS—developments that Cavell alludes to, but does not entirely incorporate into the essay.[25] (Reflecting on the past of a medium at just the moment in which it is undergoing major change is a central feature of Cavell's film writing.[26])

Cavell is particularly interested in why television obeys a different "aesthetic principle" than film: whereas the primary unit of aesthetic interest in film is the individual work (which is related to other works through its membership in a genre),[27] the primary unit in television is the "format" or "program." In other words, television obeys an aesthetic principle of "serialization," which he initially uses to refer to TV series (and our interest in them as lying in their continuity across time and across individual episodes), though for Cavell this eventually opens up to a broader sense of "the *uneventful*, the repeated, the repetitive, the utterly familiar."[28] Thus, Cavell asks what it is about television's "material basis," and the mode of perception it elicits (what he calls "monitoring"), such that our fixation on it could be on nothing other than *that*.

In *The World Viewed*, Cavell famously defines the material bases of movies as "*a succession of automatic world projections*"[29]; following some observations in that same book about live television, in his television essay Cavell accordingly defines that medium's material basis as "*a current of simultaneous event reception.*"[30] Throughout his elaborations on each component of that definition it becomes clearer that the notions of

"current," "simultaneity," and "reception" together communicate one set of thoughts about television's "liveness": something that initially results in some awkwardness for Cavell in that television of course need not be live.[31] Therefore, in taking up a suggestion apparently broached to him by his former student William Rothman while he was revising the essay, Cavell comes to understand television's characteristic "liveness" no longer on the model of live broadcasts, but rather on the model of "live switching" between modes or formats (what we might call "currents"): that is, "between these and commercials, station breaks, news breaks, emergency signal tests, color charts, program announcements, and so on."[32] For Cavell, something in this experience of switching is meant to account for the feeling of accompaniment, and even extension of ordinary domestic life, that has historically marked television and our discourse about it.[33] It also constitutes the beginning of his explanation of why television's primary unit of interest is the repeated format: if switching and, thus, discontinuity between modes are bound up with this medium's ways of communicating things to us, then likewise some kind of continuity, or repetition within formats, is required for it to be "legible" to us: that is, as something other than just switching.[34] (A central means of such legibility that Cavell later discusses is television's "regimentation of time"—its regularly dividing the day into minutes and seconds—which is meant to be intelligible to members of "industrialized societies."[35])

The other major component of Cavell's definition is "event" (by which he is initially making reference to something like a sports or cultural event); and, much as with his notion of *switching*, an event is only intelligible as "something unique [. . .] something out of the ordinary" against the background of, again, "the opposite, the *uneventful*, the repeated, the repetitive, the utterly familiar."[36] Comparing the latter to monitoring life signs or rapid eye movements, he says of various forms of monitoring and surveillance that "most of what appears is a graph of the normal, or the establishment of some reference or base line, a line, so to speak, of the uneventful, from which events stand out with perfectly anticipatable significance."[37] The fact, then, that television can successfully function as nothing but a means of surveilling the uneventful, normal, or banal reveals for Cavell something of the different aspects of perception elicited by film and the electronic screen: what he calls, respectively, *viewing* and *monitoring*.[38]

Cavell articulates this distinction by referring to his idea in *The World Viewed* that movies operate by *sparing* "our attention wholly for *that* thing *now*."[39] But in contrast with this feature of "viewing," monitoring is rather a matter of "preparing our attention to be called upon by certain eventualities":[40] in monitoring, our attention is not in the same sense *spared*, but must be ready for the possibility of the uneventful's setting the stage for the irruption of an "event." This is also perhaps one source of the peculiar comfort that Cavell thinks television provides us:[41] monitoring the

uneventful is itself comforting, since we can take relief in observing that these possibilities have not yet manifested themselves in "events," in further demands on our attention. And once again, the notion of *switching* is central to Cavell's way of understanding the act of monitoring the uneventful: he notes the essential similarity between navigating one's attention among multiple surveillance monitors (multiple "modes" or "currents") and the mechanical switching among stationary cameras characteristic of sports coverage.[42] The latter mechanisms might have the effect of further sparing our attention (as in film), but we are nevertheless—as with surveillance monitors, and their own kind of switching—being asked to prepare our attention for the irruption of *eventualities*.

For Cavell, then, there is a natural relation between monitoring a "base line" and the kinds of mechanical (as opposed, say, to narrative) discontinuities that he calls switching. He consequently says of the movement between multiple monitors that it "encodes the denial of succession as integral to the basis of the medium";[43] and this leads him to differentiate further the electronic image from film by saying that in the former "[s]uccession is replaced by switching."[44] This point about switching's relation to succession is undoubtedly deep and significant, and one that likely has immediate consequences for Varela's video work. But Cavell's explicit presentation of this point might not capture its potentially wide applicability. For example, if Cavell turned to the notion of switching (following Rothman's suggestion) in order to capture a sense of television's "liveness" that would avoid the awkwardness of the medium's not always being live, a similar awkwardness then manifests itself upon Cavell's occasional recognition that "broadcasting" need not be part of television's material basis either. (It is not clear whether he is there trying to incorporate the issue of the running of videotapes or disks; he anyway says, "I have not included transmission as essential to [television's material basis]; this would be because I am not regarding broadcasting as essential to the work of television."[45])

Therefore, if switching is so essential to the medium, but is something that might not be effected by broadcasters, who else in that case would be doing the switching? An obvious answer is the viewer herself, via the electronic monitor's controls.[46] This answer also has the contemporary benefit of opening up the possibility for the applicability of something like Cavell's notion of "switching" to the digital electronic screen, and the exceptional control that it affords. (For instance, Lev Manovich has argued for the essential continuity between, on the one hand, the "variability" and "mutability" of "new media" and, on the other hand, a TV user's control over dimensions like brightness and hue, as well as other forms of mutability characteristic of electronic signals.[47]) And this emphasis on the viewer's control has the additional benefit of being one part of D. N. Rodowick's important Cavell-influenced account of the distinct temporalities of the electronic image and celluloid projection: or, as he puts it, "the expression

of change in the present as opposed to the present witnessing of past duration."[48]

But there is another part of Rodowick's account of the two media's temporalities that brings out even further the depth of Cavell's insight that, in the electronic image, "succession is replaced by switching." This consists in Rodowick's observation that, with celluloid projection, "the individual images themselves persist as wholes with their own unique durations"; in contrast, an "electronic image, whether analogical or digital, never displays a spatial or temporal whole."[49] Thus, as Rodowick points out, in NTSC interlaced scanning (the analog color television system dominant in much of the western hemisphere until recent digital conversion) "an electron beam traces first the odd lines of a 525-line display, exciting light-sensitive phosphors along the way, and then the even lines."[50] This process is, we can say, a kind of *switching*—from one set of lines to another. (When it comes to digital displays operating via *symbolic notation*, the "switching" or breaks in continuity then take place at the level of information, allowing for their greater mutability, nonlinearity, and user control.)

Rodowick vividly brings out this set of points by noting that "even a 'photograph' displayed on an electronic screen is not a still image. It may appear so, but its ontological structure is of a constantly shifting or self-refreshing display."[51] In contrast, the display of a still celluloid image requires nothing more than that frame, a projection surface, and an adequate source of light. Whereas the feeling of succession and duration of celluloid films simply depends on the automatic succession of many such projected frames, the electronic image cannot even achieve the physical integrity of a single still photograph. Thus, if Cavell's notion of "switching" will turn out to have consequences for the work of an audiovisual artist such as Varela, then we should recognize that something like that notion—emphasizing discontinuity over succession and sameness—enjoys application not only in the switching between "modes," "formats," "monitors," or "currents" of explicit interest to Cavell (whether effected by a broadcaster or a viewer), but also in the very constitution of the electronic image itself.

* * * *

What is of particular interest in Varela's first becoming acquainted with Cavell in Hanhardt's *Video Culture* volume is not just his receiving Cavell as a philosopher of the electronic screen, but also his receiving Cavell in a volume that gives special place to political questions about the social and communal potential of radio, television, and mass media. The section of Hanhardt's volume containing Cavell's essay (labeled "Video and Television") follows a section ("Theory and Practice") partly occupied with Brecht's proposals for socializing radio, that is, for changing "this apparatus

over from distribution to communication."[52] The section thus reproduces Brecht's 1932 essay "The Radio as Apparatus of Communication," as well as the German author Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 1970 essay "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," which extends Brecht's arguments in order to argue for the vital importance for socialists to seize the productive forces of the mass media, particularly television. It also notably includes Baudrillard's critique of Enzensberger, drawn from his 1972 book *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and based in Baudrillard's understanding of the essential irredeemability of those same forces. Thus, whereas Enzensberger speaks of the "[e]mancipatory use of media,"[53] and of how the "contradiction between producers and consumers is not inherent in the electronic media,"[54] Baudrillard advocates for nothing short of "the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code," or of "what radically checkmates the dominant form."[55]

The debate between Enzensberger and Baudrillard touches on important themes in Cavell, albeit ones standing somewhat outside the text of "The Fact of Television."[56] That is, this debate recasts at the level of socialist politics and communications media Cavell's distinction (in writings contemporary with this debate) between "modernists" and "modernizers":[57] between those who, pressured by new circumstances, seek to reconstitute the previous power of a medium on new grounds, versus those who seek to reinvent (we might say "deconstruct") that medium altogether, independently of the claims or power of its previous instances.[58] (It is doubtlessly appropriate, then, that within this recast distinction those following *Brecht's* arguments would come out as "modernists.") This debate also goes straight to the philosophical issues raised in Varela's deep commitment to the communal potential of video and communications media, manifested in his dedication to "community video" in Bolivia, Oaxaca, and elsewhere.[59] And these issues are likewise raised by Varela's role as witness to and participant in the 2006 "Oaxaca commune," and APPO's seizure of radio and public TV functions (used as strategic occupations and as means for disseminating their demands of the state and federal governments).[60]

Indeed, Varela's audiovisual projects are, throughout, informed by the question of how to critique present communications media while retaining their communal potential. What is additionally striking about Varela's "political cinema" is the importance that these undertakings give to the structural issues around *switching* that have emerged for us as central to Cavell's writing on the electronic image. A clear instance of this is in Varela's film/audiovisual project, *Línea 3* (2010–11), itself composed of thirteen short films (each running between thirty seconds and just over two minutes) taking their titles and drawing inspiration from thirteen stations along Line 3 of Mexico City's Metro system: *Universidad*, *Zapata*, *División del Norte*, *E(u)topía*, *Centro médico*, *Niños héroes*, *Balderas*, *Juárez*, *Hidalgo*, *Guerrero*, *Tlatelolco*, *La raza*, and *Basílica*.[61] What these films together

constitute is an interrogation of the intertwinement of national identity and television, carried out at the very least through an irresistible symbolic connection between *television stations* and *train stations*, as well through their respective kinds of *switching* and *seriality*.[62]

When it comes to these works' engagement with television at least three types of switching are at play: (1) what we have already noted is the "switching" required for the very constitution of the electronic image, evident in these works' frequent use of the noise (i.e., the "cathode snow" mentioned in Varela's text above)[63] and vertical wipes characteristic of the analog monitor; (2) forms of switching between monitors, as in several of the films' presentation of found footage via three separate monitors, each hued to constitute the green, white, and red of the Mexican flag; (3) our ability to switch among the films themselves, especially if we are navigating among them on Varela's Vimeo page. That last aspect of the films points beyond the analog electronic image and toward varieties of digital switching. And here it might make sense to mention another proposal of Rodowick's, namely, his adaptation of Cavell's definition of television's material basis ("a current of simultaneous event reception"), and Cavell's conception of an *event*, to his own conception of a "digital event," which, stressing interactivity, he defines as "a process of simulation through algorithmic information interactions."[64] My point in mentioning Rodowick's proposal is simply to suggest that something like this notion of a "digital event," and its own form of switching, is among the topics of *Línea 3*, and its interrogation of the lines we might be inclined to draw between a "mere" digital event and a complete film.

What effects do these forms of switching have within the films themselves? In *Juárez* the presentation via "cathode snow" of speeches of Mexican presidents of the last sixty years lends both an ironic distance and a truly forbidding terror to the presidents' words, among them Carlos Salinas de Gortari's nationally televised address opposing the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, and (with even further irony) Felipe Calderón's cry of *¡Viva México!* on Mexico's Independence Day. In switching to *Zapata*, one of the series' "movie stations,"[65] we find a critical appraisal of Elia Kazan's 1952 film. Varela presents clips of *Viva Zapata!* using two different soundtracks: a dubbed Spanish track and the original English track, both sounding strange, as though even the attempt to reappropriate Mexican history from Hollywood will have alienating effects. Varela additionally bares the limits of Marlon Brando's enacting of Zapata's death as an event of heroic beauty by juxtaposing it with brutal images of the actual public exposure of Zapata's dead body.

We should also recall that for Cavell the notion of switching in television (and its replacement of the notion of "succession" on film) is meant to function as something like the other side of the mode of perception he calls "monitoring"—and thus of surveilling the uneventful, of preparing ourselves for the irruption of *eventualities*. This is likewise the case in *Línea 3*, and

in Varela's repurposing of news and surveillance footage. For example, in *Centro médico* we see footage of a live newscast from the morning of September 19, 1985, the date of Mexico City's catastrophic earthquake, in which the broadcaster María Victoria Llamas tries to reassure viewers and her colleagues—"It's just shaking a little bit" (*Está temblando un poquito*)—only for the shaking to escalate still further, until the broadcast suddenly breaks off. And in *Balderas*, Varela repurposes security camera footage of an incident that took place at that very Metro station on September 18, 2009, when during an altercation with police a man carrying anti-government signs named Luis Felipe Hernández Castillo fired a .38 revolver, killing two people. While initially the security camera is stationary—and thus functions like a typical monitor of the *uneventful*—the camera eventually zooms in, most likely looking to identify the shooter, and thus inadvertently having the effect of turning Hernández (who had said that he was acting in the name of God) into something like the protagonist of his own movie.

But the public figure who most seems to haunt *Línea 3* is Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, Mexico's ill-famed former president from 1964 to 1970, who appears in two of the films (*Juárez* and *Tlatelolco*), and who in fact opened the Metro's Line 3 at the end of his presidential term. In *Tlatelolco*, Varela juxtaposes footage and audio of Díaz Ordaz inaugurating the 1968 Olympic Games, the first-ever broadcast in color, with silent black-and-white footage from just ten days earlier, when military and paramilitary forces under Díaz Ordaz's command massacred student demonstrators and other civilians in the Tlatelolco area of Mexico City, killing what is estimated to have been over 300 people. Here the question of the Tlatelolco Massacre's relation to television and the remarkableness of Varela's devoting a "station" to it lie in what television has historically shut out. According to the journalist Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, only a few minutes of the massacre were broadcast the night of October 2nd, on the program led by Díaz Ordaz's critic Julio Scherer, *Noticiero de Excelsior*, a program that was eventually canceled and replaced with the pro-establishment *24 Horas* with Jacobo Zabludovsky, which would run for nearly thirty years.[66]

The question of what the electronic image "shuts out" takes us straight to Cavell's dark and probing way of concluding "The Fact of Television." Throughout his essay Cavell is concerned with the peculiar distrust or fear that he has found television to elicit (particularly when compared with other household devices), and eventually he arrives at one kind of explanation: that the real, or original, object of this fear are the events being monitored. He says, "my hypothesis is that the fear of television [. . .] is the fear that what it monitors is the growing uninhabitability of the world, the irreversible pollution of the earth, a fear displaced from the world onto its monitor."[67] There is, to be sure, both something correct and something slightly pat or expected about this answer, and we will want to ask how much weight Cavell means to put on it as a conclusion. In any case, much of Varela's

work could be seen as a reversal of the same thought: that it is exactly because we uncritically embrace the electronic screen that we are prepared to accept without criticism the events it monitors. This is certainly one way of describing his film *Materia oscura* (*Dark Matter*, 2016), concerned with one of the most traumatic events in recent Mexican history, the forced disappearance of forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa Teachers College the night of September 26, 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero. Varela's audiovisual assemblage consists of bringing together two different presentations of the "official story" of the crime: monochromatic images drawn from the 54,000 pages, 85 volumes, and 13 attachments publicly released by the Mexican Attorney General's Office in 2015, and audio of the final report by the inter-American human rights group (GIEI) tasked with investigating the case. In the course of the film's disclosure of these official items a startling text appears in red letters: "The State constructs a narrative that explains the disappearance as a natural process."[68] And Varela, in a further manifestation of red text, does not shy away from expressing something like the "physics," via the movement of images, of this naturalization or normalization of terrible events: "The images collide to become a wave / A miasma (still not identified) of fundamental particles."[69] And thus the film concludes.

Nevertheless, we can further link Varela's concerns to Cavell's by noting that the latter's hypothesis—about our displacing the fear of the event onto the monitor—is in fact not his final thought on the uneasiness that the electronic monitor can elicit. As it happens, Cavell comes to suggest that while those fears do indeed originate in "events," and are then displaced onto the monitor, the sorts of events he is ultimately referring to are not the very events monitored, but rather those events that the monitor "shuts out": that is, what it shuts out of its typical "reference line of normalcy or banality." Therefore, for Cavell, this suggests that "what is shut out, that suspicion whose entry we would at all costs guard against, must be as monstrous as, let me say, the death of the normal, of the familiar as such."[70] Our anxieties around the electronic image are more than anything about what it represses.

That last thought, then, presents us with the challenge of imagining an electronic image whose edges are not confines (for shutting out anything but the banal), and thus of imagining an electronic image that would open itself up to those pictures and sounds that it would be the tendency of its own medium to repress. This might be a way of describing Varela's work. It would at least be a way of describing a peculiar temporality, one in which *switching* is not opposed to *succession*, or in which television is not opposed to cinema.[71]

Notes

1 On Cavell's influence on Desplechin, see Stanley Cavell and Arnaud Desplechin, "Pourquoi les films comptent-ils?," *Esprit*, nos. 8–9 (August and

September 2008): 208–19; Marko Bauer, "'Films are vulgar. And this vulgarity, I love it': An Interview with Arnaud Desplechin," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 56 (October 2010); and in this volume, Joseph Mai, Chapter 5. On Cavell's influence on the Dardenne brothers, see Élise Domenach, "Le paradoxe de la voix. «Cité de paroles», silences et voix dans les vidéos documentaires et le cinéma de fiction de Jean-Pierre et Luc Dardenne, suivi de «Notes d'un visiteur du monde des radios libres» de Luc Dardenne," *Entrelacs*, no. 11 (2014), and in this volume, William Rothman, Chapter 2. Discussions of Cavell's influence on Malick are legion; recent examples include Gregory Flaxman, "The Physician of Cinema: Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17, no. 1 (2019): 81–98, and David LaRocca, "Thinking of Film: What Is Cavellian about Malick's Movies?," in *A Critical Companion to Terrence Malick*, ed. Joshua Sikora (Lanham: Lexington Books of Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 3–19.

2 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 15.

3 My translation from the Spanish text on Varela's Vimeo page, "Bruno Varela," Vimeo, accessed November 11, 2020, https://vimeo.com/brunovarela.

4 Freya Schiwy, *The Open Invitation: Activist Video, Mexico, and the Politics of Affect* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 115.

5 Quoted in David M. J. Wood and Gabriela Vigil, "Transnational, Digital, Mexican Cinema?, *Fogo* (Yulene Olaizola, 2012) and *Placa Madre* (Bruno Varela, 2016)," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 28, no. 4 (2019): 513.

6 See Yunuen Cuenca's description of *Mano de metate*, Vimeo, accessed November 11, 2020, https://vimeo.com/256326337.

7 On Varela's alternative distribution and exhibition methods, see Wood and Vigil, "Transnational, Digital, Mexican Cinema?," 513–14, 518–19.

8 This is also an aspect of *The World Viewed* gestured at by William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's* The World Viewed: *A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 250.

9 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 182–84, 186, 193; *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 117–18, 219, 272–74, 369.

10 See Daniel Morgan, "Modernist Investigations: A Reading of *The World Viewed*," *Discourse* 42, nos. 1–2 (2020): 213.

11 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 212, 282, 270–72, 369.

12 This feature characterizes both what is by Cavell's account the first film he ever wrote about (*Hold Back the Dawn*, 1941, dir. Mitchell Leisen) and one of the last films ever to receive his attention (*Only Angels Have Wings*, 1939, dir. Howard Hawks). See Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 155, 540–46. It is not, though, a feature that he ever explicitly addresses. For more on *Only Angels Have Wings*, see in this volume, Steven G. Affeldt, Chapter 4.

13 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 339.

14 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John Hanhardt (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 194. The essay was also reprinted in Cavell, *Themes Out of School* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 235–68, and in *Cavell on Film*, 59–85. Because of the importance to Varela of the Hanhardt volume I will continue citing that reprint of the essay.

15 Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 304.

16 Hanhardt says that "the argument that film, and by extension video, simply reproduces what is before the camera has been proven false" (*Video Culture*, 17). Noting the influence of *Film Theory and Criticism* on readings of Cavell as a photographic realist is important to Daniel Morgan's attempts to develop an alternative to that reading ("Modernist Investigations," 212–14).

17 With Varela's permission, I have edited his text to remove a somewhat separate discussion by him of *Monolito*, which, again, I aim to take up in other writing.

18 Cavell, "The Advent of Videos," in *Cavell on Film*, 167–73.

19 Cavell, "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting," in *Cavell on Film*, 241–79.

20 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 68–73, 101–08.

21 I have translated the Spanish *derivas* as the French *dérives*, which is the standard way in English of referring to the revolutionary urban strategies typically associated with the Situationist International, and which I understand Varela to be alluding to.

22 The Spanish word *espectro* could mean either "specter" or "spectrum," and Varela is evidently relying on both senses.

23 In the present chapter, I will not be able to discuss explicitly "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," the essay by Krauss collected in Hanhardt's *Video Culture* volume (179–91). I do, though, want to note that her writing and Varela's text above share a sense of the importance of using "telepathy" as a way of figuring video's distinguishing characteristics as a medium, and thus of the challenges presented by its character as a specifically *psychological* artistic medium. I also want to note the potential interest of encountering Krauss's essay and Cavell's essay together, particularly given the importance the latter (and its notion of television as "a current of simultaneous event reception") would come to play in Krauss's later writing on video art and the use of surveillance monitors by Bruce Nauman (*Under Blue Cup* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011], 119).

24 Martin Shuster, *New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 2.

25 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 196–97. These changes throughout the 1980s are the concern of Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000).

26 The paradigmatic instance of this would be chapters 1 through 9 of *The World Viewed*; see Morgan, "Modernist Investigations," 215. See also Ryan Pierson's argument that Cavell's writing on cartoons in "More of *The World Viewed*"

came exactly during the waning of the "plasmatic" conception of cartoons that Cavell effectively takes as his model; Pierson, "On Styles of Theorizing Animation Styles: Stanley Cavell at the Cartoon's Demise," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 69 (2012): 17–26.

27 Cavell's reflection on this phenomenon provides the occasion for his rich and insufficiently appreciated treatment of the distinction between "genre-as-cycle" and "genre-as-medium" ("The Fact of Television," 197–202).

28 Ibid., 209.

29 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 72; italics in original.

30 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 205.

31 Ibid., 206.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 206–7. This is also a topic of an essay contemporaneous with Cavell's and likewise reprinted in the Hanhardt *Video Culture* volume, "Cinema and Broadcast TV Together" by John Ellis, who recalls the description of the television set by the TV salesman in Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) as giving "All the company you want" (*Video Culture*, 256).

34 Ibid., 206.

35 Ibid., 214. Cavell's observations on this point are richly supplemented by two further essays in the Hanhardt collection: David Antin's historical account of how television "achieved its extreme segmentation of transmission time" (157), and David Ross's account of how Dara Birnbaum's experimental videos address the nature of "TV time" (170, 174–78). The topic of the wide intelligibility of TV formats is taken up by Ellis (259).

36 Ibid., 209. Since Cavell devotes so much attention to "uneventfulness" in his treatment of monitoring, it might seem strange that he gives priority to its opposite, "event," in his definition of television's material basis. But there might also be reason for supposing that Cavell understands the category of "event" as, adapting his talk elsewhere of "acknowledgement," the sort of phenomenon that is "evidenced equally by its [absence] as by its [presence]" (Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969], 263); it would thus be, following Richard Moran, "the idea of a characterization that determines a range of questions to which there *must* be some answer or other" (Richard Moran, "Cavell on Recognition, Betrayal, and the Photographic Field of Expression," in *The Philosophical Imagination* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 98): for example, "Is an event taking place or not?"

37 Ibid., 210. Just prior to this passage Cavell had said that it is "as if meaning is dictated by the event itself" (210). That is, in monitoring, meaning is not, we might suppose (as in the mode of perception we associate with film), primarily determined by montage, cinematography, or the event's situation within a "work." These passages by Cavell sit especially well with some observations by Douglas Davis, also included in the Hanhardt collection, on television's capacity for directing our attention onto the uneventful. Discussing the series *An American Family* (broadcast on PBS in 1973), Davis says, "'Live' time approached life time. For this reason, and because we knew the *Family* was

'real,' we stayed, waiting, aware that something unpredictably 'live' might occur yet" (273).

38 In drawing this distinction, Cavell makes clear that he means "to be calling attention to aspects of human perception generally, so that film and video will not be expected to capture one of these aspects to the exclusion of the other, but rather to stress one at the expense of the other" ("The Fact of Television," 211). Early in *The World Viewed*, Cavell had discussed film's own way of working out perceptions of the uneventful, there discussing "a possibility of the medium not to call attention to [persons and objects] but, rather, to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight," and referring to Dreyer, Flaherty, Vigo, Renoir, and Antonioni (*The World Viewed*, 25). The idea of using film and video to figure distinct cognitive operations is also, incidentally, taken up by Raúl Ruiz in his *Poetics of Cinema*, trans. Brian Holmes, Vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1995), 39.

39 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 122.

40 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 211.

41 Ibid., 209.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 210.

45 Ibid., 205.

46 Cavell alludes to this feature of electronic monitors in "The Fact of Television" (215) and more explicitly in "The Advent of Videos" (*Cavell on Film*, 169).

47 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 133–34.

48 D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 136. Cavell's influence on these passages is marked by Rodowick's having earlier taken up Cavell's notion of film as the projection of a "world past" (62–73; see Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 23, 210). In this context, Rodowick's focus is the control afforded by digital media (138), but again Manovich's arguments somewhat ease the distinction between digital and analog electronic media on this count.

49 Ibid., 137.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 138.

52 Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," in *Video Culture*, 53.

53 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," in *Video Culture*, 110.

54 Ibid., 105.

55 Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *Video Culture*, 140.

56 The debate is nevertheless also connected to Cavell's engagement in that essay with Jerry Mander's views on the essential irredeemability of television in his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Quill, 1978). See "The Fact of Television," 215–18.

57 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 15, 42 and Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xxii.

58 Alternatively, a "modernizer" might be understood as inventing an altogether new medium, but there are reasons for doubting that Cavell can allow for the coherence of such a possibility. See Diarmuid Costello, "Automat, Automatic, Automatism: Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on Photography and the Photographically Dependent Arts," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (2012): 819–54.

59 For discussion of the concept of "community video" in Oaxaca, see Charles Fairbanks, "*Archivos de video comunitario de Oaxaca* (Community video archives of Oaxaca)," *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 71–72 (Spring and Fall 2020): 33–35. Fairbanks's essay is a review of an exhibition on community video at Oaxaca's Contemporary Art Museum (MACO), December 2019–March 2020, curated by Oliver Martínez Kandt, and which included Varela's video installation *tepalcateX*. The latter was partly constituted by Varela's video *Marcha* (2006), documenting the protests in Oaxaca that same year. Footage of Varela's installation is available at https://vimeo.com/414790049. A discussion of the anti-capitalist themes in Varela's work is found in Miguel Errazu, "infra-realismo-capitalista," *Campo de relámpagos*, December 15, 2019: http://campoderelampagos.org/maquinas-de-vision/15/12/2019.

60 The volume *Enseñando rebeldía: Historias del movimiento popular en Oaxaca*, ed. Diana Denham and Colectivo C.A.S.A. (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), contains oral histories of both the "Marcha de las Cacerolas," in which women activists took control of Channel 9, Oaxaca's public TV station (131–40), and of the defense against incursions by federal police of the student-run radio station of the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (195–207).

61 Eduardo Cruz also discusses this series in "'Le pido sigan viendo las imágenes': El anti-cine de Bruno Varela," *Corresponencias. Cine y pensamiento*, no. 3 (Fall 2017): http://correspondenciascine.com/2017/11/les-pido-sigan-viendo-las-imagenes-el-anti-cine-de- bruno-varela/.

62 An additional factor, alluded to by Varela in his notes to the *Línea 3* series on his Vimeo page, is the connection between trains and the iconography of the Mexican Revolution, as in the famous 1912 photograph of *soldaderas* at Buenavista station. See also Andrea Noble, *Photography and Memory in Mexico: Icons of Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 99–119.

63 See also Cavell's discussion of the analog TV's snowy image in "The Advent of Videos" (*Cavell on Film*, 172).

64 Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 140.

65 The other "movie stations" are *División del norte* (using footage from *Así era Pancho Villa* [1957, dir. Ismael Rodríguez]), *La raza* (*México de mi corazón*

[1963, dir. Miguel M. Delgado]), and *Basílica* (*La virgen de Guadalupe* [1976, dir. Alfredo Salazar]).

66 Ramírez Cuevas, "La televisión le debe una autocrítica a México: Televisa y el 68," *Masiosare*, October 20, 2002, https://www.jornada.com.mx/2002/10/20/mas-ramirez.html. In this same article Ramírez Cuevas quotes the Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis's memory of those few minutes on television, by his account captured from the third floor of Tlatelolco's Chihuahua building: after some shots, "They spent like eight or ten minutes on the air: you saw the people thrown onto the floor, you heard the screams, the wailing, the insults. Everyone was thrown down, the reporter who was narrating and the cameraman, nobody would get up. Then you saw a group of civilians enter and take some students, who you saw crawling down the stairs in the middle of the shooting. And then the broadcast stopped" (my translation).

67 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 217.

68 My translation from the Spanish.

69 My translation from the Spanish.

70 Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 217.

71 I thank Bruno Varela and David LaRocca for their support and encouragement at every stage in my preparing this chapter. I also thank Eduardo Cruz, Marcela Cuevas Ríos, and David M. J. Wood for their advice as I was undertaking this project.