Research Article

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Rewatching, Film, and New Television

Abstract: Those of us who are captivated by new television (the sort of serialized television that began largely in the early 1990s), often find ourselves rewatching episodes or whole series. Why? What is the philosophical significance of the phenomenon of rewatching? In what follows, I engage with the ontology of television series in order to think about these questions around rewatching. I conclude by reflecting on what the entire discussion might suggest about the medium of new television, about ourselves, and also about our world and the possibilities of art in it.

Keywords: Stanley Cavell, aesthetics, television, art, phenomenology, worldhood, world, meaning, hermeneutics, genre

1 Introduction: Watching and rewatching

Those of us who are captivated by new television (the sort of serialized television that began largely in the early 1990s), often find ourselves rewatching episodes or whole series. Why? What is the (philosophical) significance of the phenomenon of rewatching, if any? As an opening, let me recall how at a certain point in *Senses of Walden*, Stanley Cavell claims that "without the mode of perception inspired ... by the everyday, the near, the low, the familiar, one is bound to be blind to the poetry of film, to the sublimity of it."[1] Cavell continues noting that without such a mode we would also be cut off from "some of the best poetry of philosophy – not now its mythological flights, nor its beauty or purity of argumentation, *but now its power of exemplification, the world in a piece of wax*."[2]

There is a lot in these quotes, and it may not be immediately obvious why these remarks about film (or poetry) might be useful when thinking about new television let alone rewatching. My thought, which I can only gesture to here, but for which I have argued elsewhere,[3] is that the ontology of film – that is, how we ought to understand the aesthetic objects that appear on the screen – is consonant with the ontology of television series. This is so because both fundamentally rely on screening a world to us. In this regard, I find Cavell's work on the ontology of film fruitful and useful.[4] Notice in the above quotations that Cavell is already raising several issues that are equally important for television series: that what's screened in film or new television might be seen as poetic or sublime, somehow bound up with who we most fundamentally are in our most ordinary lives; that somehow such aesthetic objects are themselves intimately related to the practice or pursuit of philosophy; and that these two points must somehow be understood and contextualized amidst a broader discussion of having a world, being in a world, and relating to that world as an

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1 Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 150.
2 Ibid. Emphasis added.
3 See Shuster, *New Television*.
4 Deeper discussions of this point can be found in Shuster, "The Ordinariness and Absence of the World."

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important task for philosophy ("the world in a piece of wax" is surely meant to call to mind Descartes's famous invocation of a ball of wax in the second meditation).

In what follows, I engage with this shared ontology only in a limited fashion in order to think about what it means to be drawn – and importantly *redrawn* – to what's on the screen. What does this suggest about new television, about ourselves, and about our world? Much of my argument will hinge on exploring the sort of pleasure involved in watching and rewatching.

2 World

Central to Cavell's understanding of film ontology is the question of having and screening a world, and that question hinges on understanding that the screen is a barrier. Here's how Cavell puts it: "A screen is a barrier. What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds – that is, it makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me – that is, screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is *its only difference* from reality. (There is no feature, or set of features, in which it differs. Existence is not a predicate.)"[5]

There are two points that I want to stress in thinking about this quote. First, note that Cavell is here linking film and philosophy rather closely.[6] To anyone versed in Western philosophy, Cavell's phrasing will call to mind Kant's discussion of the category of existence in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,[7] where he notes that existence is not a predicate. As Kant points out, an existing hundred thalers (dollars) is not any different than an imaginary hundred thalers: a dollar is a dollar regardless of whether it exists, even though it may make a big difference to my practical life whether it does at this moment exist – reside – in my wallet. Second, note the importance of the category of world. The invocation of this category connects Cavell to an entire philosophical (specifically: phenomenological) tradition (more on this shortly), exemplified for Cavell above all in the work of Thoreau and Heidegger.[8]

What does it mean to have a world? Or to be in one? Or, relevant to understanding our relationship to film and it being screened before us, to be absent from a world? Cavell speaks "of film as satisfying the wish for the magical reproduction of the world by enabling us to view it unseen."[9] When talking about this phenomenon of "viewing the world unseen," Cavell frames his discussion around conceptions and traditions of modern philosophy. Here's what he writes: "What we wish to see in this way is the world itself – that is to say, everything. Nothing less than that is what modern philosophy has told us (whether for Kant's reasons, or for Locke's, or Hume's) is metaphysically beyond our reach or (as Hegel or Marx or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche might rather put it) beyond our reach metaphysically."[10]

Cavell's suggestion is that the aesthetic significance of film ought to be linked somehow to the project of modern philosophy. Both might be seen as underwritten by a shared reliance on our visual sensibilities in the context of our existence as creatures with a world (whether a world of objects or concepts or whatever else, i.e., the world of, say, what appears as much as the world of what interests us).[11] This way of framing the connection appears very much to be indebted to the way that Heidegger himself approached the problems of modern philosophy. Cavell stresses this link to Heidegger's understanding of modern

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5 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24. Emphasis added.

6 For more on what's at stake with such a link, see Wartenberg, "On the Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy." See also the essays in Herzogenrath, *Film as Philosophy*.

7 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A596–B624.

8 Cavell, "Night and Day." For more on Cavell's indebtedness to phenomenology around this topic, see the discussion in Shuster, "The Ordinariness and Absence of the World." See also Techio, "The World Viewed and the World Lived."

9 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 101.

10 Ibid., 102.

11 This is a suggestion that even critics of Cavell's ultimate conclusions about/from film agree with. For example, see, for example, notably Foa Dienstag, *Cinema, Democracy and Perfectionism*, 68–9.

philosophy when Cavell notes that: "Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self."[12] Compare this to Heidegger's claims in "The Age of the World Picture,"[13] where Heidegger claims that, "the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age."[14]

In modernity, the world itself comes to be understood as a sort of image, where our relationship to that world is fundamentally – chiefly and almost exclusively – representational. In Heidegger's words, "world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture."[15] Such a view leads to a particular picture of ourselves as embodied within the world: our relationship to the world is such that the world is *out there*, and our mode of access to it is mediated by means of our capacity for representing it. Due to a particular conception of our sensibility as fundamentally representational, there also emerges a particular epistemological paradigm, namely one that admits a distinct sort of skepticism.[16]

3 Having a world and skepticism

To see how this is all the case, let's note that film exhibits a world by screening that world to us. Such a screened world can be considered – just like any other world, including our own – from the perspective of and in relation to a particular epistemological paradigm. How do we understand the nature and existence of the world that we are perceiving before us? This question, importantly, can be posed equally well of the world in which I am writing this, as much as of the world that the screen is exhibiting before me (a world that I perceive but do not *access* in the same way – admittedly a lot hinges on what it means to access the world, which is roughly the topic of this section).

Although Cavell's reference point for conceiving of a world is Heidegger, it is useful – with an eye to what I'll suggest shortly – to introduce Heidegger's thought with reference to the work of his teacher, Edmund Husserl.[17] In the first book of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Husserl introduces the notion of world with the thought of a horizon. Husserl homes in on how no matter what we perceive, it is always already somehow situated for us amidst a broader horizon. Such a horizon "makes up a constant halo around the field of actual perception."[18] He goes on, noting that such a world is never "exhausted," and instead "is 'on hand' for me in the manner peculiar to consciousness at every waking moment."[19] This is so much the case that "in the fixed order of its being, it reaches into the unlimited," i.e., this is always the case in perception, and "my indeterminate surroundings are infinite, the misty and never fully determinable horizon is necessarily there."[20]

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger highlights how the aforementioned modern view – where we understand our relationship to our world in fundamentally representational terms – is in fact derivative of a more fundamental way of being in the world. According to Heidegger, we are not "next" to a world, rather we are always *in* one.[21] The overlap with Husserl's claims, about us having an infinite horizon in which we locate ourselves and what we perceive, should be apparent. A commentator on Heidegger profitably terms

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12 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 102.
13 Cavell mentions this essay in the *World Viewed*, but it is unclear whether it directly influences Cavell in *The World Viewed*.
14 Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 130.
15 Ibid., 129.
16 On this point, see Rorty, "The World Well Lost."
17 According to Heidegger, he pursues a sharp break from Husserl's approach to phenomenology and to worldhood. I think this is debatable. For more on this point, especially around the topic of world and worldhood, see Overgaard, *Husserl and Heidegger on Being in the World*.
18 Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 52.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 12.

this an "absorbed coping."[22] On such a view, "self and world belong together ... self and world are not two beings, like subject and object ... but self and world are the basic determination ... in the unity of the structure of being-in-the-world."[23]

Only when this absorbed coping falters, for example if something doesn't make sense or if our engagement with the world is halted, by, say, a problem or an unexpected occurrence or discovery or an object or whatever else, then do we switch gears into a representational stance where we fundamentally relate to something outside of us, as a subject to an object. Only when our practical engagement with the world comes to a halt do we undertake a way of being in the world where we are situated opposite objects as opposed to amidst them. When this happens, we are more likely to engage in various epistemological modes of inquiry: we question rather than use. For both Husserl and Heidegger – and importantly, for Cavell – the world is thereby not simply the relationship between a subject and an object (let alone a collection of objects), but rather the horizon by which we have any objects altogether; that is, any particular object only becomes what it is for us in a broader contextual horizon, and, importantly, that horizon can itself affect what we see (or don't). Objects are never solitary (nor are we), instead always fitting into a region of a broader world, occupying a broader web of significance.[24]

Cavell's point is therefore that the world of the screen – in this phenomenological sense – is screened to us and therefore screened off from us. The world of the screen will never be our world, except as an object in our world (i.e., a screen ... and if that's our experience of a film or television show, then our aesthetic relationship to what's on the screen has either broken down, or never existed). Because the world is screened to us, we are forever – ontologically – sealed off from it. Given this discussion, one significance of film that emerges is that it offers a response to the modern representational paradigm and concomitant predicament that Heidegger diagnoses. Because the world is screened to us, in the case of film and new television, the responsibility for the world is "out of our hands."[25] In other words, unlike in our world, we can have no effect on the world screened to us; we are a mere ghost in that world (almost always, even less than that, because the denizens of that world cannot even acknowledge that we are haunting them).[26]

4 Skepticism and film, and new television

This ontological split between us and the world screened to us in film and new television, forms the basis for Cavell's suggestion that film is fundamentally an "automatic world projection."[27] Cavell highlights how, as in Husserl's conception, an entire horizon is presented to us before any particular objects are; thus he notes that with film, reality is present "before its appearances are known."[28] Film presents us with a world in this deep phenomenological sense, filled with a horizon that far outstrips what we see on screen. The crucial feature of such a screened world, however, is that we are forever absent from it. We can never enter it, we may be said to haunt it. This is what Cavell highlights when he stresses that the screen is "not a support, not like a canvas; there is nothing to support, that way," rather the "screen is a barrier," where "it screens me from the world it holds – that is, makes me invisible."[29] The same is true for our experience of new television.

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22 See Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 69ff.

23 Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 297.

24 In Cavell's work, this is not a merely ontological or phenomenological point, as if these approaches could be divorced from ethical and political conclusions. On this point, see especially Panagia, "Why Film Matters to Political Theory;" and Panagia, "Blankets, Screens, and Projections: Or, the Claim of Film."

25 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 102.

26 I say "almost always," because there are interesting cases – in shows like *Fleabag, House of Cards, House of Lies* – where characters do address us directly and thereby appear aware of us. I explore the significance of this phenomenon in Shuster, "*Fleabag,* Modernism, and New Television."

27 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 73.

28 Ibid., 185.

29 Ibid., 24.

These thoughts prompt Cavell to call film a "moving image of skepticism," thereby invoking here the epistemological paradigm highlighted above. Let me pause here in order to flag the precise way in which skepticism is being invoked. Commonly, skepticism might be tied to a particular scheme of representation, where a particular paradigm conception of our senses takes hold, then, as Heidegger notes, our relationship to the world becomes one lodged around representation. Richard Rorty captures this point well when he notes that, "any theory which views knowledge as accuracy of representation, and which holds that certainty can only be rationally had about representations, will make skepticism inevitable."[30] On such a view, we can always ask whether our representations "match up" to what's "out there" in the world.[31]

Cavell's view of skepticism, however, differs from this more common view. When Cavell stresses that film is a "moving image of skepticism," he follows up his comment with an explanation that stresses, "not only is there a reasonable possibility, [but rather] it is a *fact* that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes."[32] In other words, the world we see on screen does not exist as part of our world in the phenomenological sense – it is a (phenomenological) world of its own whose defining property in distinction to our world is that it is a *different* world, one that is inaccessible to us in that phenomenological way. Our relationship to it can only ever be one of viewing it, not of being *in* it, in the way that we are in *our* world. Cavell follows up these comments with a crucial claim, he notes that even in light of all of this, "to deny, on skeptical grounds, just *this* satisfaction – to deny that it is ever reality which film projects and screens – is a farce of skepticism."[33]

Cavell is thereby locating film in a very distinct register: it is not the case that film screens to us something that is not real. It is real, but it is a reality from which we are barred. Why would alleging that the world screened to us in film (or new television) is not real make a farce of skepticism? Cavell's answer to this question once again trades on the phenomenological tradition elaborated above. He notes that while such a claim "seems to remember that skepticism concludes against our conviction in the existence of the external world," it nonetheless "seems to forget that skepticism begins in an effort to justify that conviction … to yield here to the familiar wish to speak of film as providing in general an 'illusion of reality' would serve to disguise this latent anxiety – as does the conclusion of philosophical skepticism itself."[34] Cavell's point is that once such an epistemological, representational paradigm is on the scene, then *any* response to it, whether one that denies our knowledge in the face of it or one that affirms it, is already a skeptical one; all such responses take our relationship to the world to be a *problem* that somehow involves knowledge. As Cavell puts it, "at some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world,"[35] i.e., the possibility for our being in the world – our absorbed coping – to break down emerged. In such case, "our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation,"[36] i.e., *our* relationship to the world became a problem.[37]

Given that our relationship to the world of the screen is fundamentally differentiated from our relationship to our world *not* by whether one or the other world is "real," but rather by how seriously it can present a world to us, and in which world we are in, we need to assess the significance of the world of the screen in quite particular terms. To the extent that the world on the screen and the world in which we are in are both real, our relationship to each is thereby a problem for us. It is that fact – that we exist in relation to each

30 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 113.

31 There is a lot more than might be said here, especially about how this paradigm differs from pre-modern ones, where instead of something coming *in* to our sensory apparatus, something was being sent *out*. Central to this entire paradigm shift is the Muslim polymath, Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen). See Lindberg, "Alhazen's Theory of Vision and Its Reception in the West;" and El-Bizri, "A Philosophical Perspective on Alhazen's Optics."

32 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 189–90. First emphasis added.

33 Ibid., 190.

34 Ibid., 189.

35 Ibid., 22.

36 Ibid.

37 There is a lot more that might be said here in the context of the relationship between these claims in *The World Viewed* and in Cavell's, *The Claim of Reason* (which while published after *The World Viewed* was largely written before). I pursue this in more detail in Shuster, *New Television*, 22–30.

kind of world rather than simply in each – that is exactly what guarantees their significance and thereby their ultimate reality to us as modern subjects. The question, as much for our world as the world of the screen, then, is how we relate to each. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell poses a series of questions about our relationship to the world we're in, but they apply as much to the world of the screen. He asks: "Shall we say that we have *faith* that the things of our world exist? But how is that faith achieved, how expressed, how maintained, how deepened, how threatened, how lost?"[38] In the context of film, Cavell summarizes the issues at stake as follows:

> I described the artistic significance of the motion picture ... as its apparent and unpredictable solution of the problem of reality at a stroke, by its miraculous neutralizing of the need to connect with reality through representing it, by its stroke of acquiring this connection through successive projections of reality itself. And I went on to say that this had also not solved the problem of reality but brought it to some ultimate head, since the connection is established by putting us in the condition of "viewing unseen," which establishes the connection only at the price of establishing our absolute distance and isolation. And this is exactly the price of skepticism.[39]

The ontology of the screen, in turn, demands that the director undertake particular strategies – genre conventions, types, various *automatisms*, as Cavell calls them – in order to compel conviction in the worlds on the screen.[40] As with other modernist arts, it may be the case that these automatisms fail, that the work of art in question simply fails.

As earlier, while I cannot present this claim in its entirety here (although I have laid out the case for it elsewhere),[41] the modality of new television – instantiated across a range of genres from police procedurals to court dramas to period pieces to sci-fi operas to military epics to whatever else – is defined by two features: (1) the exhibition of a world where all human institutions have been emptied of normative authority, and (2) a concomitant exception with regards to (the institution of) the family. Think, just for example, with regard to this suggestion, of shows as diverse as *Breaking Bad*, where even the powerful normativity of science is brought into question as Walter White pursues his bloody crime saga "for" his family, to *The Sopranos*, where modern America is presented merely as one giant criminal enterprise with family at the heart of it, to *24*, where there simply is no norm that will not be sacrificed to family (imagined either as one's immediate family or one's extended family, i.e., the nation), to even *The Wire*, which presents the modern American city as entirely absent of any normative authority, offering the family as the single glimmer of something possibly better. Furthermore, these two aspects of the mode of new television are often presented using traditional televisual genres (e.g., police procedural or sitcom) while eschewing the regular predictable natures inherent to such forms (more on this shortly).

5 Rewatching, having a world, and (new) television

It is with this last point about predictability that I want finally to raise the question of rewatching, especially around new television. To do that, I want to return to the earlier points about a world and especially about having a horizon as a central feature of having a world.

Any such horizon, as Heidegger and other philosophers in the phenomenological tradition ultimately came to argue, is inflected by particular moods.[42] In Heidegger's terminology, being in the world involves an attunement (*Befindlichkeit*): as we have already seen, we are not a mere subject relating to an object (or

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38 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 243.

39 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 195.

40 I discuss this in more detail in Shuster, *New Television*, 30–47.

41 See ibid.

42 A theory of moods is developed prior to Heidegger in Husserl's work, but is found across several sources, including unpublished ones. For more on this, see Lee, "Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology of Mood;" and Ramírez, *Feeling and Value, Willing and Action*.

objects), rather we are attuned in such a way so that there is a certain sort of equipoise between what the world reveals about itself and what it reveals about us at any moment.[43] Think of this as a phenomenological feature of being in a world. It is important to note furthermore that, in this tradition, mood is not merely some subjective state. The world *suggests* a particular mood; for example, something (in the world) frightens me. This is not to say, of course, that there is no subjective component; it is *I* who become frightened, but not for no reason (this is not to say, however, that there may not be bad reasons, as in, for example, a cop who is frightened of any non-white body because of explicit or implicit racism). Moods are, again in Heidegger's terminology, disclosive (again, as Heidegger notes, for example, fear reveals something threatening).[44]

This phenomenological understanding of mood offers a means to think about the relationship between this world and the world of the screen. To begin to unpack that idea, let me introduce a remark of Wittgenstein's about pleasure. Late in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states: "See it not as obvious, but as a strange fact (*merkwürdig Faktum*), that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure (*Vergnügen*), occupy our minds (*Geist*)."[45] What is beyond my scope here is the aesthetic basis of that pleasure – there are a slew of options here, from Kantian inspired accounts that focus on the pleasures involved with the absence of fixed conceptual categories for judgment (i.e., in the context of judgments of beauty) to accounts that prioritize the pleasures inherent to rhythm, affect, or whatever else. It seems to me less important at this juncture to settle the why or how of the pleasure than to admit that there is some pleasure involved with both watching and rewatching; or, again, let's just agree to acknowledge the importance of mood in this context.

With that in mind, let me admit something: I think that I have now seen *The Wire* in its entirety more than five times all the way through. Several of those times involved rewatching it as I was preparing a book, but other times, it just struck me as something I wanted to do. Notably, choosing to rewatch a television series is a different prospect than choosing to rewatch a film; most saliently, the time commitments are quite distinct (I am interested here in rewatching an entire series, like one might a film, rather than rewatching a particular episode or episodes, like one might rewatch the scenes of a film). There is, it might be said, *more* of a commitment involved here, a temporal seriousness to it that far exceeds mere entertainment, or at least suggests something different. Furthermore, there is also the issue, in common with film, that I now *know what will happen*, thereby seemingly undercutting, at least when it comes to rewatching, one avenue of explanation for the sort of attraction(s) that new television series might offer (say, unpredictability or the discovery or unmasking of something). Finally, as with the object of fright, something about the (aesthetic) object in question invites watching it again; it is appropriate here to speak of a mood that might compel rewatching. Given Wittgenstein's suggestion above about pleasure, say, provisionally, that the mood involved is joy.[46]

Note that with reference to the ontology of what's being screened, everything stays the same: whether we're watching or rewatching, we are still always screened off from the world of the screen. What we are seeing, however, is inflected differently. It is the case that our experience of rewatching is different to watching. We know what will happen. That feature – that certainty – both entirely accords with the skepticism that follows from the ontological facts and also rubs against it. Cavell's image of skepticism as a state of "being sealed off from the world" – an image that's harnessed so profitably in the analysis of the significance of the ontology of the screen as a barrier[47] – no longer feels entirely as apt, or at least requires some sort of contextualization in the context of rewatching. Even as we are ontologically sealed off, we have

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43 See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 29–30.

44 See ibid., 30.

45 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 524. Translation modified. Some political conclusions are teased from this remark in the context of Cavell's work on film in Panagia, "Why Film Matters to Political Theory," 103ff.

46 For an exploration of this mood in Heidegger, especially as an "authentic" possibility of human beings, see Smith, "On Heidegger's Theory of Moods."

47 We might parse this as a sort of voyeurism. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 45; and see also Laugier and Cerisuelo, *Stanley Cavell*, 34.

hooked an epistemological fingernail into the world of the screen. We haunt it, but now in the way that on certain conceptions of ultimate reality, God might be said to haunt the world (think, for example, of the way that, say, Boethius envisions God's providence about human affairs, as a view from a place to which we are oblivious and from which we are absent, and *vice versa*).[48]

Let me start this paragraph now with a spoiler warning about *The Wire, Breaking Bad, The Sopranos*, and *The Shield* (just to name a few random series). Note that the very idea of a spoiler warning itself suggests something about the epistemological issues and pleasures involved in watching and rewatching. What happens when I watch *The Wire* or *Breaking Bad* when I know that Omar or Walter White is killed, respectively? How about when I suspect that Tony Soprano is also killed in the notorious final black screen of *The Sopranos*? Or when I know that Vic Mackey will get his due punishment and lose his family at the end of *The Shield?* What relationship, if any, exists between such epistemological frames and the joy we might normally get from watching these television series?

One way to tackle these questions is to note that they have something in common with questions already in circulation around film and new television, namely the question of genres. For example, genre conventions *also* already suggest a kind of epistemological fingernail into the world. When we watch a (traditional) western or a romance (or remarriage) comedy or police procedural or courtroom drama, we experience "a narrative whose outcome is clearly signaled from the outset."[49]

There are two different ways to register the significance of this fact.

On one hand, we might claim that television genres and the episodes that actualize them are defined by a sort of "reductive pressure,"[50] where every facet of an episode is already delineated by the parameters of the show in procedural terms: the characters do not change in meaningful ways, and every episode is a sort of hard reset where the characters move, perhaps through new situations, but in highly predictable ways. Often this is exactly how people periodize television prior to the advent of new television.[51] Notably, we rewatch such television also, but we do so perhaps allegedly to sulk in our powerlessness, to revel in it: to retreat from the world in order to find comfort in abdication and repetition; in short, we allegedly rewatch to pass the time. In psychoanalytic terms, we might say that this conception of rewatching is masochistic, in the sense that it worships the past, taking what's shown as immutable and exactly drawing pleasure from that in order to assuage the resentment we otherwise repress due to our overall state of powerlessness (this might be the same mindlessness that also allegedly endlessly compels us to scroll through social media).[52] On such a view, what's remarkable about so-called "new television" might be the fact that it eschews many of these conventions, aims to break out of such reductive pressure by producing highly evolving characters, distinct genre combinations, or episodic and storytelling paradigms that fundamentally push against the sort of epistemic certainty that such reductive pressure seems to guarantee or offer. New television seeks to offer, say, a pleasure that is not masochistic.

On the other hand, there is no reason to attribute mindlessness nor masochism to any such reductive pressure, and, indeed, the very idea of it being "reductive" may already be sneaking in a value judgment that is simply inappropriate. For example, it may be the case that even shows as allegedly as "simple" as, say, *All in the Family* or *The Love Boat* (just to name two) are in fact shows that virtuously avoid a certain kind of epistemological paradigm, an avoidance whereby a particular "masculinist history of unveiling, and its critical derision" of predictability is seen as problematic, involved fundamentally with "unmasking as an epistemological strategy" that references "both misogyny and moral censorship."[53] On such a view, the fact

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48 See Book IV of Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

49 Stevens, "Romantic Comedy and the Virtues of Predictability," 33.

50 VanArendonk, "Theorizing the Television Episode," 69ff.

51 The story can, of course, be tempered with some "intermediary species." For such an account, see Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised*.

52 Erich Fromm puts this point about masochism well when he notes that "the masochistic character worships the past" (Der masochistische Charakter vergottet die Vergangenheit). For more on this point, see Fromm, "Studien Über Autorität Und Familie," 119.

53 Stevens, "Romantic Comedy and the Virtues of Predictability," 44.

that "there are no secrets about what will happen," reveals new television's eschewing of such traditional genre traditions as a fetishization of epistemology, no different than "the longstanding association" between truth and the feminine, with "philosophers seeking to strip her [truth] nude."[54] On such a view, pre-new television, predictable television shows "attest that we do largely know how things will go, even if we find enjoyment in pretending that we do not. We do know, really, that social and political institutions which precede our own introduction into the world allow relatively few prospects of profound change. And, of course, we all know that each of our stories will end in death."[55] The joy that emerges from the constancy of genre – of predictability – ultimately rests on the fact that this predictability "feels like freedom," ultimately "from epistemological and narrative structures," and also thereby "from the gendered connotations they entail," and – it might be said given the above reference to our finitude – from our very mortal coils.

I see no way to settle for one view over the other. There are pleasures to be found in predictability and unpredictability, and also dangers. I suggest drawing inspiration here from another remark by Wittgenstein, who once wrote "don't get involved in partial problems, but always take flight to where there is a free view over the whole *single* problem, even if this view is still not a clear one."[56] Such a higher view in this context would involve trying to integrate these positions in some dialectical fashion. One way to proceed might be to understand all such genre conventions, and the associated judgments and categories and moods associated with them, as a sort of sundial to the present moment, revealing broader social and political conditions, conditions which may in fact reveal contradictory impulses, indeed, contradictions.[57]

Given these dialectical possibilities and my earlier invocation of phenomenology, and given the philosophical stakes involved in thinking about (new) television, it strikes me as worthwhile to register, in this context, the phenomenological impulses and underpinnings of two now classic texts in Anglophone philosophy – John McDowell's *Mind and World*,[58] and Rorty's aforementioned, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. I am led here because of two traits these texts share. First, each of them revolves around how we need to understand our relationship to the world, indeed how we ought to understand the very notion of a world. Second, and more importantly, both books strikingly conclude with an invocation of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and especially the idea of a worldly horizon. Gadamer, a student both of Husserl and Heidegger,[59] should be viewed as exactly involved in the sort of phenomenological approach invoked above. McDowell marshals Gadamer and the notion of a horizon as a repository for tradition, while Rorty marshals the notion of a horizon as the means by which we change and constitute ourselves. At a very high altitude, it might be said that McDowell focuses on the ways in which our worldly horizon is inherently conservative, the way in which it sets the parameters by which the world and the objects in it are given to us, while Rorty focuses on the way in which our worldly horizon perpetually harbors progressive potential, allowing for radical change in our world simply by means of how that horizon is constituted.

These two views are not unrelated to the question of the import of predictability rehearsed above. Recall especially the suggestion that predictability within televisual genres offers a possibility for acknowledging the impossibility of truly radical change – to which we might say: is it truly impossible? This seems to me neither a simple nor an idle question. Note furthermore in this context how Cavell frequently stresses that the world on screen is a world that is *past*. As he puts it, it is a world I "see, but to which I am nevertheless not present ... is a world past."[60] Yet, notably, Cavell also speaks of film as screening "a world of an immediate future," i.e., not "a world just past nor a world of make-believe."[61] In this way, "the temporality

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54 Ibid., 43.

55 Ibid., 45–46.

56 Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, 23.

57 Such an account of, say, older television can be gleaned from Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*. See especially, for example, the discussion of *I Love Lucy* at 182ff. For new television, I would cite my own Shuster, *New Television*.

58 McDowell, *Mind and World*.

59 For more on their relationship, see Scheibler, *Gadamer*; Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics*; and Kusch, *Language as Calculus Vs. Language as Universal Medium*.

60 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 23.

61 Ibid., 82. This is a point that is oftentimes overlooked in discussions of *The World Viewed* and Cavell's book. It is elegantly and importantly presented in Morgan, "Modernist Investigations."

of cinema [but also of new television] is radically open – at least once we factor in the experience of the viewer's engagement with the film. This is why some films evoke the 'Once upon a time' while other films ask us to imagine 'What if one day.'"[62] It is of course an empirical fact which judgment applies when, and what (dis)pleasures it brings (or fails to).

To get a grip on the dialectical picture that's emerging here – spread out seemingly across several modalities, from questions of predictability to questions of optimism or pessimism – let me cite a remark of the great film critic, Victor Perkins, who noted that, "what we see in the world is so much more a product of our will and whim than what we see on the screen."[63] Perkins continues, teasing out a significance of this point: "since it is not possible to affect the course of events [on the screen], it is not necessary either. If we are without power we are also without responsibility. Our exclusion from the world so *vividly represented* frees us from the need to consider what we see in terms of an active response."[64] This is so much the case that "we can observe the progress of a fire with that much more attention when it can be neither our business to put it out nor our concern to escape."[65]

Keeping Perkins's remarks in mind, imagine then, that the ontology of the screen makes available a sense of our own temporality. In watching, because we are barred from that world, we cannot but realize that we are a creature with a past and a future; it remains open to us with any watching to judge which element – past or future – to prioritize. In stressing the possibility of what's screened to us as being of the past *or* of the future, there is an implicit prioritization of the present: only we can decide what sort of world is being screened to us, and in doing so we register a judgment about both our world and the world of the screen, not to mention the possibilities of each, and indeed, of art altogether (this is one way to understand the forcefulness and the ultimate aesthetic success of *Black Mirror:* it urgently raises the question of whether what's being shown to us is already here, i.e., a world past, or whether it is a world that might yet still be, i.e., a world of the future). This sense of the importance of temporality is only potentially heightened when we rewatch because the entire machinery of judgment is so potentially heighted, as when we rewatch to get at a prior judgment, to confirm or disconfirm or, at the very least, to test it (more on this shortly).

Our fundamental relationship to the world – any world – is one of acknowledgment.[66] A screened work of art demands that we acknowledge, whether explicitly or implicitly the separateness of our world and the world of the screen. In doing so, however, we are offered the possibility of achieving conviction in our experience, conviction in the world of the screen, and therefore, ultimately, conviction in and about our world (and our place, and the place of art, in it). The psychoanalytic economy of viewing screened works of art is such that even as it exhibits and prioritizes our powerlessness as humans, it also – at least potentially – makes the case for the powers of (televisual) art.

6 Conclusion

One striking fact about rewatching is that it naturally pushes any genre toward predictability. Rewatching reorients even "epistemophilic narratives" (narratives that prioritize unmasking something that wasn't known prior) toward the predictability of traditional genre conventions (like older forms of television). In the context of new television this takes on a particular tenor. In a prior work, I have argued that, at its best, the genre of new television – with its prioritization of an exhibition of the total loss of normative

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62 Ibid., 232. Morgan is quoting Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 83.

63 Perkins, *Film as Film*, 71.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 "I do not propose the idea of acknowledging as an alternative to knowing, but rather as an interpretation of it, as I take the word *acknowledge,* containing *knowledge,* itself to suggest (or perhaps it suggests that knowing is an interpretation of acknowledging." See Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life," 39.

authority and its recourse to the family – offers its greatest potential and most interesting aesthetic accomplishments when it acknowledges these features through an understanding of the family, not as the site of biological necessity or rigid gender or identity categories, but rather as the site of the raw potential involved in being human, of what, following Hannah Arendt, can be termed human natality: the fact that we can each potentially introduce something new into the world (think of 24 as an example of the former and of, say, *Weeds* as an example of the latter).[67]

On such an understanding of new television, I take it that one possibility for rewatching signals, as I suggested above, a desire to test one's judgment about a particular piece of new television. Given where the world is now and what the show achieved (achieves?) as a work of art (given that is, the mood of the present moment), will this show continue to compel conviction? Note that this is a question as much about me as about the world as about the show (the aesthetic object). With Cavell, it might be said that what's screened in this context "promises us happiness exactly not because we are rich or beautiful or perfectly expressive, but because we can tolerate individuality, separateness, and inexpressiveness. In particular, because we can maintain a connection with reality."[68] In other words, aesthetic experience – our conviction that this piece of new television matters to us as art – is exactly a way of maintaining connection to reality, to the world, both of the show and its creator(s).[69] In this way, I think it is fundamentally mistaken, as one commentator claims, that film and television restrict our vision in terms of "reciprocity," locating us as having "the vision of the animal, which sees everything except another perspective."[70]

There are, of course, other reasons for rewatching a series, many – like instances of new television themselves – are regressive (avoidance rather than acknowledgment, resignation rather than potentiality, passing the time rather than inspiration). But this is just another way to say that there are many kinds of joys. My point has been that it is possible to locate one kind of joy in (re)watching new television, one that is "not predicated on a freezing of the world or a desire for mastery over it, but rather on the hope to see it anew and, in light of that re-seeing, to perhaps find different ways to be and act in the future."[71] I have written "rewatching" as "(re)watching" just now exactly to acknowledge that rewatching in this context means testing again an original judgment for the potentiality of a particular work of art, of a particular piece of new television. In this way, given the way in which new television oftentimes unfolds in new, genre bending, "complex" ways,[72] there are deep analogies between watching and rewatching in the context of new television, where both often revolve around testing one's intuitions about a particular genre, seeing whether one's initial (or subsequent) judgments about a particular piece of new television will turn out to be correct.[73]

To the extent that we are all, in Robert Warshow's words, "self-made," forming "ourselves in terms of the particular choices we make from among the confusing multitude of stimuli that present themselves to us,"[74] rewatching offers another site for such formation. It must be stressed that, as with all art, there is no reason to see it merely as imitative, but rather it may in fact be seen as constitutive of our world. Let me conclude with a thought by Cornelius Castoriadis, who wrote:

> No philosopher ever starts by saying: 'Let Mozart's Requiem be a paradigm of being, let us start from that.' Why would we not start by positing a dream, a poem, a symphony as paradigmatic of the fullness of being and by seeing in the physical

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67 This overall point (with reference to these shows and others) is argued for in Shuster, *New Television*, 170–74.

68 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 215.

69 This need not be unpacked ultimately as a commitment to auteur theory, at least not in any traditional sense. The point will stand even if we acknowledge that shows – like films I might add – are assembled in complex ways. On the former in the context of new television, see Nochimson, *Television Rewired*.

70 See Foa Dienstag, *Cinema, Democracy and Perfectionism*, 70. I am also not sure that this is true of animals, see Crary, *Inside Ethics*.

71 Rennebohm, "The 'Cinema Remarks'," 75–6. As should be obvious, I am quite sympathetic to Rennebohm's account and intend for this account to be complementary.

72 Mittell, *Complex Tv*.

73 On this point, see the discussion of *True Detective* in Nannicelli, *Appreciating the Art of Television*, 133ff.

74 Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, xxxvii.

world a deficient mode of being, instead of looking at things the other way round, instead of seeing in the imaginary – that is, human – mode of existence, a deficient or secondary mode of being?[75]

I once mentioned this to some colleagues only to be met with the mocking response that: "Everything is water" (mockingly hearkening back to Thales and the prehistory of philosophy, when seemingly any idea could be asserted). Of course, the suggestion that Castoriadis is letting his philosophical fancy run amuck is not entirely without substance. There are indeed problematic ways of unpacking what he is suggesting.

At the same time, in conclusion, I think, for example, of the way in which Michaela Coel's brilliant show, *I May Destroy You*, intervened in the present #MeToo moment, offering at one time an understanding of how gender and race come to be intertwined in the present moment of late capitalism, while *also* proposing a potential way forward, one that eschews the typical binary that society presents (i.e., eschews both retribution and revenge, and passivity and subjugation). In the concluding scenes of *I May Destroy You* (spoiler warning!), the protagonist, Arabella, has finally remembered the trauma of her rape in its entirety (the premise of the show is that the trauma unfolds non-linearly, episodically, hesitantly). In the prior episode she finally remembers the identity of her attacker. What occurs in this final episode is an exhibition of three distinct desires and fantasies: one of vengeance (where she kills her attacker), one of a kind of rapprochement (where she and her attacker encounter each other, engage in dialogue, revealing him also as a victim of earlier violence), and some mixture of the two (where they encounter one another sexually again, this time with her penetrating him). The three are built on and around each other, often bleeding into each other, so that the viewer is unsure which is prioritized, or, indeed, whether it may even make sense to speak in terms of prioritization here. Its stylistic approach and composition force us to confront our own desires in response to *I May Destroy You*. The entire show then concludes with a sort of coda, almost an add-on, where Arabella appears to be at peace, involved in having produced a piece of art (a book) that also works through this question, i.e., through her trauma. It is meant, I believe, to be a meditation on the show, the trauma that underwrites it (the show's creator, Michaela Coel, has noted that she herself was sexually assaulted), and the place of art in each of these. It is meant also to signal our place in this drama. There are no easy answers around any of these topics, but *I May Destroy You* invites rewatching exactly to try to get at the best way forward given the intimate relationship between late capitalism and misogyny on the one hand,[76] and between that and the role of art (if any) in our world. And, in this way, with Castoriadis, it seems to me entirely appropriate to highlight how our current (binary or simplistic) practices *are* entirely deficient when compared to the possibilities that this work of art proposes, and thereby the possibilities it offers.

Or at least I'd like to watch it again and see.

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75 Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*, 5.
76 Penny, *Meat Market*.

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