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## Heidegger and Cavell on artistic medium in the post-medium condition

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### ABSTRACT

The article proposes a theory of artistic medium through a conjoint reading of Martin Heidegger and Stanley Cavell. My thesis is that the concept of the medium such reading yields is a necessary dimension of the idea of art still operative in the contemporary “post-medium condition,” in which the material bases of works are no longer bound to conventional identification within the system of the arts. I show that Rosalind Krauss’s conception of “reinventing the medium” as the essential artistic task of this situation is adumbrated in a central tenet of Cavell’s philosophy of art: an artistic medium is created—rather than applied—in a successful artistic instance. I further show that this notion, consistently associated with the figure of circularity in Cavell’s text, is grounded in Heidegger’s understanding of the artwork as a world-disclosing event, paradoxically creating its own conditions. In the last two sections of the paper, I explore the significance of artistic medium for both philosophers as the bearer of the transcendental claim for “material meaning” against the prevailing Cartesian paradigm of modernity. Finally, I argue that Heidegger’s interpretation of the artwork’s material basis as “coming-forth-concealing,” furthered by Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of “matter-as-difference,” makes the concept of the medium, so construed, universally applicable to the variety of arts in the post-medium condition, and grounds the ontological necessity of this multiplicity.

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### Introduction

This essay offers a philosophical reassessment of the concept of artistic medium through a conjoint interpretation of Martin Heidegger and Stanley Cavell. I begin by explaining why I believe such conceptual work is (still) required and the suggested reading is a promising way of pursuing it.

The notion of artistic medium had its heyday as the master-concept of the now largely unpopular doctrine in modernist aesthetics, known as medium-specificity or medium-essentialism. In broad strokes, the core of this doctrine is the notion that the material basis of an art—whether due to its specific limitations (Greenberg) or unique potentials (Bazin)—ought to serve as a necessary normative ground for creation and assessment of works sharing this basis. It is precisely the prescriptive orientation of medium-specificity that, with the rise of the pluralist sensitivities in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, has made it appear untenable. Noël Carroll, for instance, convincingly argued to the effect that any artistically valid work running against the alleged “medium-essence” provides a sufficient refutation of its essentiality (Carroll 1996, 1–36). At the same time, the relegation of the medium to merely instrumental status, which Carroll takes to be following from this critique (Carroll 1996, 29), neglects the ontological insight underlying the various

medium-essentialist positions and which cannot be as easily dispensed with as their aesthetic teleology. As it was recently formulated, “the renewed concern with the idea of the medium” — such as motivates the present investigation—“stems from the recognition of the material and technical register of the work of art as the very site rather than a mere support of meaning” (Graw and Lajer-Burchard 2016, 8). One merit of the specific interpretation of this idea I wish to propose is that it renders the refutation of aesthetic prescriptivism not only *compatible* with such recognition but rather *implied* in it. For the strange alliance of essentialism and pluralism, as I hope to demonstrate, stems from the very ontology of the phenomenon at stake.

But then it may, and has been, generally argued that the construal of the medium as a constitutive, sense-generating dimension of the artwork flies in the face of what has come to be described as art’s post-medium condition. In Peter Osborne’s words, what the condition entails is nothing short of a wholesale transformation in the very “historical ontology of the artwork: . . . the transition from an ontology of mediums (painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, film, video) to a postconceptual ontology of art in general” (Osborne 2013, 108). It must, however, be noted at this point that the term medium comprises

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two interconnected, yet distinct, meanings, referring alternately to one of the arts (e.g. sculpture) or to a particular material or technique (e.g. stone-carving, or say, marble). The decline of the medium in the first sense does by no means entail its irrelevance in the second sense. Indeed, as Osborne shows, the collapse of “the ontological significance of the . . . system of arts” not only brings to “expansion to infinity of the possible material means of art-making,” but also exposes the ineluctable “aesthetic remainder”—that is, a necessary material dimension—of any artwork whatsoever (as “generic” or conceptual as it may be) (Osborne 2013, 49–50). While for Osborne, in the current paradigm of art, this “remainder” could not bear the significance that the full-fledged medium once enjoyed, for Rosalind Krauss, who was first to theorize this paradigm as “post-medium condition,” its defining artistic activity consists precisely in a systematic cultivation of this dimension, “the act of reinventing the medium,” as she calls it: that is, substantial articulation of a material basis unsanctioned by any artistic tradition. “The medium in question here,” Krauss explains, “is not any of the traditional media—painting, sculpture, drawing, architecture,” but rather “the idea of a medium as such, a medium as a set of conventions derived from . . . the material conditions of a given technical support” (Krauss 1999, 296).

My aim in this article is to provide a systematic philosophical explication of the idea so announced—a task, which Krauss’s own work leaves undone for reasons that seem to exceed its art-historical framing. Yet, it appears to be clearly called for by her later, metaphysically rich (and, one may feel, somewhat Heideggerian) phrasing of reinventing the medium as “figuring-forth the work’s support—summoning it up to the surface as a reflexive image of the work’s very ground” (Foster et al. 2016, 786). For Krauss, this artistic procedure signals the moment of continuity between the practices of historical modernism and those of *some* contemporary artists, who “assume the mantle of the true avant-garde” (Foster et al. 2016, 786). But if this operation is of such ontological importance or, indeed, a token of artistic authenticity, as Krauss seems to suggest, shouldn’t we consider it constitutive of art as such—that is, equally (albeit, maybe, differently) operative in installation art (to which Krauss contrasts her medium-inventing heroes such as William Kentridge and James Coleman) and the variety of arts which continue to be practiced today in conventionally defined media (poetry, music, film, etc.)? The affirmative answer to this question sets the guiding assumption of my argument here, while also marking its methodological break with Krauss’s own position. Krauss

believes that the “idea of the medium as such” “stands apart from any philosophically unified idea of Art” and only thus embodies the promise “to reclaim the specific from the deadening embrace of the general” (Krauss 1999, 305). Running contrariwise, my own hypothesis can be outlined along the following three points: (1) the concept of artistic medium could be adequately construed only as an intrinsic dimension of our idea of art, (2) from which the plurality, Krauss rightly associates with it, is ontologically derived, and (3) which makes it a priori relevant to the infinitely diverse variety of objects and practices that matter to us in terms of this idea.

The fact that Heidegger and Cavell explicitly agree on (1), and more or less implicitly, as I aim to show, on (2) and (3), is a major reason of mine for pursuing the idea of artistic medium by a reading in their texts, written generation and two generations, respectively, before its formulation by Krauss. This archeological movement backwards on the historical timeline will be at the same time a descent into deeper ontological layers of the phenomenon. In Section 2 I present Cavell’s theory of artistic medium revolving around the circular structure of medium-creation, which I take to be equally operative in Krauss’s doctrine of “reinventing the medium.”<sup>1</sup> This structure, as I shall argue in Section 3, is best accounted for in terms of Heidegger’s understanding of art as a world-disclosing event, generating its own conditions of intelligibility—among which the material conditions, theorized as the artwork’s *earth*, play a metaphysically privileged role. Section 4 and Section 5 are concerned with the notion of materiality involved in the idea of the medium for both thinkers. This will expand our discussion from the ontological constitution of the artwork to the transcendental significance of art, in the explication of which we shall turn for some help to the work of Jay M. Bernstein and Jean-Luc Nancy.

### The circularity of medium-creation

In the introduction to the revised edition of *The World Viewed*, Cavell delineates the project of his inquiry into the ontology of film as an exploration of the structure he terms “the cinematic circle”:

... giving significance to and placing significance in specific possibilities and necessities (or call them elements; I sometimes still call them automatisms) of the physical medium of film are the fundamental acts of, respectively, the director of the film and the critic (or audience) of film; together with the idea that what constitutes an “element” of the medium of film is not knowledge prior to these discoveries of direction and of criticism. This reciprocity between

element and significance I would like to call the cinematic circle. Exploring this circle is something than can be thought of as exploring the medium of film. (Cavell 1979b, xiii–xiv)

The circular structure described in the passage has nothing specifically cinematic about it, abbreviating Cavell's theory of artistic medium in general. The word "artistic," conversely, should be read with a double emphasis here. First, the medium is posed at the very core of art's being—defining the fundamental acts of the creator and the audience of the work. Second, as we see empathically put in some other passages, the circularity described here pertains *essentially* to art: "Only an art can define its media" (Cavell 1979b, 107). Put schematically, the circularity at stake consist in the fact that while the material element precedes and conditions the artistic act, it is only through this very act that this element becomes (an element of) an artistic medium. This circularity may also be framed as the circularity of the medium and the genre—the latter concept taken most broadly as referring to the generalizable (that is, formal) features defining any particular mode of artistic achievement (a Godard as much as a most formulaic sitcom). The circularity of medium-creation is the central ontological feature of Cavell's aesthetic thought, generating its paradoxical conceptual rhetoric, and equally informing two complementary contexts of its deployment: the modernist crisis within such traditional arts as painting and music and the emergence of cinema as a new traditional art.

In the latter context, Cavell articulates his position while contesting Erwin Panofsky's account of the birth of the seventh art in terms of its "exploitation of the unique and specific possibilities of the new medium" (Cavell 1979b, 30):

The first successful movies—i.e. the first moving pictures accepted as motion pictures—were not applications of a medium defined by given possibilities, but the *creation of a medium* by their giving significance to specific possibilities. Only the art itself can discover its possibilities, and the discovery of a new possibility is the discovery of a new medium. (Cavell 1979b, 32)

At first glance, this passage resolves the paradoxicality of the cinematic circle by way of mere disambiguation. The medium, understood as a set of possibilities conditioning the artistic achievement, is not the same as the one defined by significance given to these possibilities in particular works. "The invention of the photographic picture," as Cavell phrases the point again, "is not the same thing as the creation of photography as a medium for making sense" (Cavell 1979b, 38), and while the former may precede any particular application, the latter is produced by "the art itself" and is meaningful as what it is only

within its context. Cavell's recurring (albeit not entirely consistent) terminological point is that the term "medium" should be reserved for the second meaning:

The idea of a medium is not simply that of a physical material, but of a material-in-certain-characteristic-applications. Whenever there is anything to be called, and any good purpose in calling anything "the medium of music", there certainly are things to be called various media of music, namely the various ways in which various sources of sound ... have characteristically been applied: the media are for example, plain song, work song, the march, the fugue, the aria, dance forms, sonata form. ... In music, the "form" (as in literature, the genre) is the medium. (Cavell 1976, 221)

Thought of as an open array of *media* (in the plural), the medium tends to merge with the category of the genre—that is, particular artistic conventions of articulating the material basis. However, another thing this passage makes clear is that this terminological shift does not release Cavell's model from its declared circularity: the medium-genre is now opposed to the "idea ... of a physical matter" – *the* medium of an art—with which it maintains the same paradoxical relation described in the cinematic circle passage. While it sounds true enough that "wood ... would not be a medium of sculpture in the absence of the art of sculpture" (Cavell 1976, 221), something intrinsic to the woodiness of wood itself appears to be definitive of this art as a particular mode of sense-making "figured-forth" in, say, Donatello's *Magdalen*. Accordingly, while as Cavell repeatedly claims, human types are the fundamental features of the genres establishing the medium of film, the creation of these types is conditioned by specific ontological necessities of the medium itself (Cavell 1979b, 36–37). The medium-generating artistic instance "tap[s] the source of medium ... as such" as a dimension "profounder of any of its instances" (Cavell 1979b, 103), or—to use an analogous Krauss's metaphor—"mine(s) the support for its own conventions" (Krauss 1999, 302). "The medium," in Cavell's words again, "should be invented out of itself" (Cavell 1976, 221).

The circular structure of medium-creation, underlying the establishment of cinema as a new traditional art, becomes the explicit focus of such established traditional arts as music or painting in their modernist phase. Indeed, for Cavell, modernism is defined precisely by "lay[ing] bare what has been always true of art" (Cavell 1976, 189). Cavell distinguishes between the traditional and the modernist modes of artistic existence with regard to the notion of *automatism* – a term he introduces to designate the hybrid medium-genre category ("a material-in-certain-characteristic-applications"), encompassing entire genres as well as their *topoi* (e.g. both sonata

and cadence), as patterns of giving sense to the physical basis of an art (Cavell 1979b, 104). While a traditional art is defined by the unproblematic reliance on the automatism constituting it (even if it is a tradition in the making which is at stake, as in the case of cinema), a modernist condition of an art is defined by the worry over the fact that the media (even those—or especially those—of age-old traditions) are not given a priori—that is, prior to any new artistic achievement (Cavell 1979b, 106). Hence, for modernist art, medium-creation is not only an ontological structure of artistic production but an essential, pathos-laden “task of establishing a new automatism”: “to declare, from itself, the art as a whole for which it speaks ... no longer to produce another instance of an art but a new medium within it” (Cavell 1979b, 103–104). Thus, for example, in the situation when “we do not know a priori what painting has to do or be faithful to in order to remain painting” (Cavell 1979b, 106), “Pollock made dripping into a medium of painting” (Cavell 1979b, 31–32).

Two further aspects of this conception should be noted for our purposes. First, as Cavell takes the notion of automatism to emphasize, when “a medium is discovered, it generates new instances: not merely makes them possible, but calls for them, as if to attest that what has been discovered is indeed something more than a single work could convey” (Cavell 1979b, 109). But then, we may think, the point of Pollock’s discovery is not the establishment of a medium of *painting* (if what this means is a new way of standing to the standards of quality set by Rembrandt or Eakins), but rather the establishment of dripping as a new practice of artistic sense-making. Reorienting thus the concept of the medium from the past to the future—from continuing a tradition (as it is emphasized when Cavell is read together with Fried)<sup>2</sup> to inaugurating a tradition (which, as we shall see, follows from reading him together with Heidegger)—is key for recognizing the continuity between his conception of the medium and the task of reinventing the medium in the post-medium condition.

Cavell himself, however, remains committed throughout to the conventional identification of an art, which a newly discovered medium is a medium *of*, as the framework for putting into words the ontological content of such a discovery. Hence, the second aspect of his model I wish to consider makes him closer to the more familiar versions of medium-essentialism. After already having claimed that Pollock created *a* medium of painting, Cavell finds it appropriate to further inquire: “Since it makes paintings, what does his all-over line discover?” Cavell’s somewhat idiosyncratic answer points at what he calls “the condition of total thereness”: “not exactly that a painting is flat, but that its flatness, together with

its being of a limited extent, means that it is totally there, wholly open to you, absolutely in front of your senses, of your eyes, as no other form of art is” (Cavell 1979b, 109). At the same time, Cavell is at pains to accord this apparently essentialist claim with artistic pluralism, in light of which claims of just this sort have been found problematic: “There may be any number of ways of acknowledging the condition of painting as total thereness—which is perhaps to say that there are any number of ways in which that condition can present itself, many different significances it may develop” (Cavell 1979b, 110). According to this picture, the plurality of media created in works of art (e.g. dripping) “discover” each in its own particular way some essence of the medium preexisting the medium-creation (e.g. total thereness). Although there undoubtedly remains a certain tension between not knowing a priori what painting is and the positing of total thereness as its ontological condition, the latter does not commit Cavell to the essentialist prescriptivism such as criticized by Carroll. For not only is there a plurality of ways for disclosing an essential condition, Cavell neither claims there is only *one* such condition to a medium of an art nor that the disclosure of any particular condition sets a necessary criterion of artistic value. What Cavell’s theory does imply is that the disclosure of a medium-essence is one of the necessary dimensions of the phenomenon of art and consequently one of the a priori terms in which the work of criticism could be conducted. Such reading finds support in our intended grounding of Cavell’s conception of the medium in Heidegger’s ontology of art, which also pushes it towards the possibility of a more radical ontological pluralism.

### The turning of the event and the artwork’s earth

As much as Cavell’s work has to teach us about art, nowhere does he explicitly pursue the question, some answer to which his theory of artistic medium seems to imply: “What is (the essence) of art?”<sup>3</sup> This question, however, is boldly dealt with in Martin Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935–36), and it is my belief—which, of course, I could only partially vindicate here—that, rightly interpreted, the conception of art proposed in this text is the ontological framework in terms of which Cavell’s philosophy of art could be brought to systematic consistency.

Heidegger’s thought in general and his conception of art in particular is permeated with the figure of circularity. It appears in the opening remarks of “The Origin” as the methodological issue of the hermeneutic circle (to know what art is we must look at artworks, but to know which entities are to be considered artworks we must know what art is),



while pertaining, as Heidegger leads his readers to assume, to the subject of this particular investigation in a special manner: “Not only is the main step from work to art, like the step from art to work, a circle, but every individual step that we attempt circles within this circle” (Heidegger 2002, 2). In a later text, Heidegger states that all the variety of “turnings, circles, and loops” at all the different levels of his thought has its “concealed ground” “in the turning which essentially occurs in the event” (Heidegger 2012, 322). Thinking art “out of the event” (Heidegger 2002, 55) is indeed the main idea of Heidegger’s philosophy of art, concentrated in the condensed answer he provides to the question regarding the essence of art explored in “The Origin”: “the essential nature of art is the setting-itself to work of the truth of beings” (Heidegger 2002, 16).

In general lines, the conception of art this thesis abbreviates runs as follows. Art is one of the domains in which the most fundamental parameters of human reality are being produced. Heidegger uses an array of related terms to speak of such metaphysical genesis. Besides the already mentioned *event* (*Ereignis*), the ontological implications of which we shall immediately discuss, of special importance is the term *unconcealment*, which—famously modelled on the Greek word for truth *a-letheia*—enables Heidegger to inscribe within the very notion of such an occurrence a dynamic relation to *concealment* (non-meaning, untruth, etc.) conditioning it. Of that which comes to be unconcealed Heidegger thinks as an open-ended, network-like whole of significance, and hence the first essential feature of art is defined as “opening-up of a *world*.” This idea is exemplified in “The Origin” by a discussion of the Greek temple, which—so it is claimed—“first gives to things their look, and to men their outlook of themselves,” structuring thus the circumspective unity of material nature (“the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night ... tree, grass, eagle and bull” etc.) and social values (“disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace” etc.), informing the existence of the historical community of the polis (Heidegger 2012, 20–21).

Although the degree of conformity of Heidegger’s “world” with the meaning of the word in Cavell is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that there is a direct continuity here, inspiring, as Cavell admits, the very title of *The World Viewed* (Cavell 1979b, xxiii). More concretely, arguing that “the films of Hollywood constituted a world” (Cavell 1979b, 36)—that is, articulated for their audience the foundational values of its historical community in a manner that had no parallel in the highest coeval achievements of painting or music (Cavell 1979b, 4–5, 1981, 17–18)—Cavell gets closer than anyone else to rendering the most hyperbolic aspects of Heidegger’s doctrine applicable to an actual artistic

phenomenon. For the purposes of our argument, however, which, to the contrary, aims at the most general ontological model of art contained in his text—equally relevant to Pollock or, indeed, to Van Gogh, whose art could hardly boast such communitarian merits—Heidegger’s world-opening should be understood structurally rather than socially. In these terms, the point of the notion would be that what defines the essential mode of artistic sense-making is the coming to be of a *realm* of meaningfulness or a *framework* of intelligibility (rather than, say, a communicative act). An authentic artwork generates certain possibilities, sensitivities, values, patterns of sense-making, etc., necessarily extending beyond its immediate experiential actuality.

Another and, indeed, the most ontologically radical point of world-opening lies not in any identification of what is inaugurated within it, but in the productive spontaneity of inauguration itself, as implied in the Heideggerian *Ereignis*. Inasmuch as the event of unconcealment claimed to take place in art is not a particular occurrence within a given realm of meaningfulness, but the coming to be of such a realm as a whole, it is, metaphysically, a locus of an absolute, self-conditioning origin: the artwork, as Heidegger puts it, “belongs uniquely within the region it itself opens up” (Heidegger 2002, 21). Radical as it sounds, this claim may be taken to capture a fundamental metaphysical intuition informing our experience of art and manifesting itself in such beliefs as that art creates its own audience; that judging an artwork by a priori criteria misses the very point of experiencing it as a work; or, indeed, that only art can create its media—in short, of the artwork’s autonomy. Recognizing the truth of this intuition, as I believe Cavell did, one must settle it with the undeniable fact that—to be sure—on the empirical level a great deal of factors precede and condition a work of art, including such blatantly heteronomous ones as economy, politics, or psychology. Moreover, the absolute self-origination Heidegger ascribes to the work of art can’t be empirically given at all, for we can never experience something not preceded by anything but itself. It is here that the turning becomes essential to the Heideggerian event: phenomenally, its ontological spontaneity comes about in the figure of reversal, in which the effect appears as preceding its cause. As Heidegger states clearly enough, although at the empirical level, some natural phenomena and communal organization precede and condition the erection of the temple, adequately conceiving of it as a work of art amounts to “thinking everything in reverse,” that is, taking it as the origin of its empirical conditions (21). The idea can also be phrased in terms of circularity: empirical factors condition the artwork, whereas the artwork makes its conditions intelligible as what they are.

I hope that the structure so described by now strikes a familiar note, for as I wish to claim, it is precisely the one we have encountered in Cavell's "cinematic circle," where a particular kind of the artwork's conditions—namely, those that define its physical basis—become what they are as an outcome of its accomplishment. This structure clearly (albeit not exhaustively) determines Heidegger's own conception of the artistic medium, theorized in "The Origin" under the notion of *earth*, which Heidegger suggests as the appropriate term for thinking "the nature of that which one usually calls the 'work-material'" (e.g. "stone, wood, metal, color, language, tone") "from within the perspective" of the world-opening—that is, in accordance with the productive ontology of the artistic event (Heidegger 2002, 24). At the same time, figuring as the artwork's second essential feature and the striving counterpart of world in the dynamic constitution of unconcealment, earth stands for the metaphysical phenomenon of "coming-forth-concealing" (*Hervorkommend-Bergende*): an explicit manifestation in the artwork of concealment as "the continuing origin of all clearing" – that is, an immanent ontological dimension of the event it procures (Heidegger 2002, 24-25).<sup>4</sup> Earth thus brings together *two* distinct notions, the speculative unity of which, as I shall argue in the next section, is a central, yet often overlooked, contribution of Heidegger's conception of artistic medium. For now let us focus on the first aspect of this complex idea.

Heidegger's explication of earth as the mode of material existence peculiar to art begets with its demarcation from the phenomenality of material employed in the manufacturing of equipment:

Because it is determined through usefulness and serviceability, equipment takes that of which it consists into its service. In the manufacture of equipment—for example, an axe—the stone is used and used up. It disappears into usefulness. . . . On the other hand, the temple work, in setting up a world, does not let the material disappear; rather, it allows it to come forth for the very first time, to come forth, that is, into the open of the world of the work. The rock comes to bear and to rest and so first becomes rock; the metal comes to glitter and shimmer, the colors to shine, the sounds to ring, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of the stone, into the firmness and flexibility of the wood, into the hardness and gleam of the ore, into the lightening and darkening of color, into the ringing of sound, and the naming power of the word. (Heidegger 2002, 24)

In the production of a piece of equipment, the material is totally subjugated to the form of the product, and is "invisible" in its normal use; in the work of art—to the contrary—the material comes to be directly experienced, contributing to the meaningfulness of the

work beyond the purpose imposed on it by the human hand. In works of art, the essential qualities of material media come to be disclosed, and Heidegger's list ("the massiveness and heaviness of the stone. . . the firmness and flexibility of the wood . . . etc.") might be taken as a concise abbreviation of what a more thorough critical work would expand as essential medium-contents (e.g. Cavell's "total thereness"). Such focus on the material existence of the work is, of course, a preponderant feature of modernist aesthetics, which Cavell shares with the more traditional proponents of medium-specificity, such as Clement Greenberg or Rudolf Arnheim. Specifically, the transparency of material, which Heidegger ascribes to equipment in contrast to art, will be in just a few years after the composition of the essay posed by Greenberg as a matter of reproach for the figurative pre-modernist painting, for which the "transparent" medium, in this sense, was merely instrumental (Greenberg 1985, 36–37). As it is a fact largely overlooked, the undeniable placement of Heidegger in this camp is as such worth emphasizing. It is, however, the more radical claim of the passage which signals its alliance with the uniquely Cavellian version of medium-essentialism: the materials explicitly experienced in the work of art acquire their particular modes of meaningfulness *for the first time*. This idea is of course a direct implication of theorizing art "out of the event": since the nature of world-opening is the coming to themselves of all things constituting the world of the work, among those belong the materials of which it is wrought and the techniques of employing them. Putting the same idea in Cavellian terms, we may say that when "the rock comes to bare and to rest and *first* becomes rock" in the temple-event, it is created as a medium of architecture.

### Material meaning and transcendental opacity

We have established the continuity of Heidegger's and Cavell's conceptions of artistic medium: medium-creation—central to Cavell's account and suggested in rudimentary form in Heidegger—is a function of world-disclosing event, which—explicitly for the latter and implicitly for the former—defines the essence of art. The continuity between the two conceptions, however, is not so exhausted. Our aim now is to elaborate this still schematic dual account by exploring the notion of materiality, which it implies as the basic ontological characteristic of the phenomenon at issue. Cavell's admitting of "trying to free the idea of a medium from its confinement in referring to the physical bases of various arts" (Cavell 1979b, 105).<sup>5</sup> as well as Heidegger's declaration that "nowhere in a work is there any trace of work-material" (Heidegger 2002, 25) by no means undermine such identification. For the common point of these claims is precisely that

a particular transformation of our relation to what is normally conceived as materiality is inherent to the essential operation of art.

But what is exactly so normally conceived? What is matter? Although the definitions vary, the most influential accounts in the history of philosophy since Plato share with our everyday intuitions the following framework. Matter is understood as what it is from within an opposition to a supposedly immaterial ontological dimension, to which it stands in deficient or metaphysically subordinate relation: matter vs. form, *res extensa* vs. *res cogitans*, intuitions vs. concepts, etc. Resistance to this subordination is intrinsic to both Heidegger's and Cavell's conceptions of artistic medium and, indeed, to their understanding of the *raison-d'être* of art. We have already seen Heidegger distinguishing art from equipment as a domain where matter is not entirely dissolved in the teleology of form, but figures as the source of an object's meaningfulness. It is, however, the Cartesian version of this fundamental metaphysical opposition which is immediately relevant for the explication of the historically defined materialist problematic in Heidegger and Cavell.

In "The Age of the World Picture" (1938/1952)—the very essay alluded to in the title of *The World Viewed*—Heidegger positions Descartes' thought as the foundational site of the modern cultural paradigm and formulates an influential version of its critique. Establishing the subject as the relational center of being, the Cartesian onto-historical paradigm conceives of everything that is as objects of representation. Defined by the attribute of extension, ontologically incommensurable with the attribute of thinking which defines subjectivity, material nature—for Descartes and for the modern scientific worldview arising with him—is deprived of any intrinsic authority, gaining its sole meaningfulness from the calculative apparatus projected on it by the subject. The intrinsic orientation of this paradigm to domination, Heidegger thought, alienates the human from the possibility of being at home in the natural world (Heidegger 2002, 57–85).

It is in keeping with these ideas that, in the continuation of the passages quoted earlier, Heidegger considers the artwork's earth "in contrast to the technological-scientific objectification of nature" (Heidegger 2002, 25). Acquiring under scientific view "the calculable form of weight," the stone is voided of such phenomenologically meaningful qualities as "massiveness and heaviness," which we have seen showing themselves in the temple-event. "Color shines and wants only to shine," Heidegger continues. "If we try to make it comprehensible by analyzing it into numbers of oscillations it is gone" (Heidegger 2002, 24–25). It is indeed the second essential feature of Heidegger's artwork, irreducible to the world-

opening, that it necessarily involves something in the form of "letting color to do what it wants" — that is, a releasement of meaning that intrinsically belongs to a particular region of material nature, established thus as a medium. Jay M. Bernstein places this notion at the very "core of art's rationality potential" as the domain of transcendently securing—in resistance to the prevailing metaphysical paradigm—of the possibility of "material meaning." The idea of artistic medium, he claims, is "the last idea of material nature as possessing potentialities for meaning" (Bernstein 2006, 74–75).

Heidegger's choice of such phenomenologically rich and poetically loaded term as "earth" for the designation of this notion is intended to inscribe at the most fundamental level of the artwork's ontological constitution the vision of nonalienated material nature: earth as that upon which "historical man finds his dwelling in the world" (Martin Heidegger 2002, 24). Equating it with *phusis*, Heidegger uses earth in the temple passages to capture the whole of natural—rather than social—aspects of the world-opening: the grace of the sun, the violence of the storm, etc. (Heidegger 2002, 21). Yet, as inspiring as it may be, such a picture of "Mother Earth" is precisely the aspect of Heidegger's text which occludes the radical ontological insight and enormous methodological potential of *earth* as a concept of artistic medium. Interpreting the notion along these lines shifts the status of earth from the artwork's ontological feature to a criterion for distinguishing and evaluating different forms of artistic practice. In particular, such substitution led Heidegger himself to disregard film as a genuine medium of art (for as an exemplary product of technological modernity, it can hardly fit into such picture) and may raise similar, if not graver, doubts with regard to the "dematerialized" post-conceptual practices. But deprived of its ontological universality, earth is not only methodologically limited — it also contradicts the very eventness of an artistic event, to which no a priori notion of its medium may precede.

To construe the ontological notion of earth in such a way as for it to carry the transcendental stakes of material meaning beyond its "naturalistic" interpretation, the emphasis should be put on Heidegger's second way of inflecting the term. In the same passage quoted above, Heidegger points at the impenetrable opacity of stone as another phenomenological feature, eluding the scientific approach. Unlike the heaviness, however, this quality does not define stone as a particular kind of matter, but serves Heidegger as an image of the ontological attribute defining matter as such. But this phenomenon—I follow Bernstein in calling it *transcendental opacity* (Bernstein 1992, 85–119), so as to underline the equal impenetrability for thought of the literal



opacity of stone and transparency of glass—is none other than concealment, internally constitutive of unconcealment as such and brought to explicit presence each time anew in particular world-disclosing events.

The crux of Heidegger's conception of earth is the speculative unity of the acknowledgment of transcendental opacity ("coming-forth-concealing") and the medium-creation ("rock first becomes rock"). The work of art reinterprets materiality as concealment unconcealed, and its own inaccessible ground as the truth of materiality. "Letting color to do what it wants" is the manner in which the metaphysical principle of concealment is brought forth. Heidegger abbreviates this idea in the following formula: "The work lets *the* earth [materiality as the ontological principle of concealment] be *an* earth [the medium created in a particular work]" (Heidegger 2002, 24 - emphasis added). And this is also how we should understand that "the self-seclusion of the earth is ... no uniform, inflexible staying-in-the-dark, but unfolds, rather, into an inexhaustible richness of simple modes and shapes" (Heidegger 2002, 25) But as much as materiality is defined by the relation of self-seclusion to inexhaustible richness and not by any particular realization thereof, the materialist stakes of art—and hence of the concept of artistic medium as a necessary dimension of the works bearing them—are equally constitutive of sculpture in marble, photographic medium of film, and the aesthetic remainder of post-conceptual art.

### Acknowledgement and hyletic circle

As much as for Heidegger, the problematic of material meaning pertaining to art is related, for Cavell, to the paradigm shift the West undergoes in modernity, which in a clearly Heideggerian parlance he captures as "withdrawal of the world," and the primary philosophical explication of which he too recognizes in Descartes. Yet, Cavell interprets the core problem of Cartesian subjectivism with rather different emphases, identifying it as the "advent of skepticism" (Cavell 2003, 19–20)—in the elaboration of which he famously lets skepticism toward other minds to take center stage. The interpretation of knowledge as certainty and of being as representation makes the experience of other human bodies as bearers of subjective interiority similar to mine (rather than, say, automatons, as it is suggested in the only mentioning of other people in *Meditations*) an epistemological blind spot, and—as much as we are dependent on the recognition or love of others—the existential problem of isolation (Cavell 1979a, 477–483).<sup>6</sup>

It is important that Cavell first introduces the term *acknowledgment*—to become central in his theory of artistic medium—as a proper philosophical answer to

this problem in its paradigmatic manifestation: the question of knowing the other's pain (Cavell 1976, 238–266). Shortly put, Cavell's argument is that the very casting of the issue as an epistemological one is part of the problem to be cured. It is not knowledge, but rather acknowledgment—as a mode of comportment, in which the epistemic is immanently permeated with the ethical—that defines the adequate relation to other's pain and very existence. But as much as the isolation from others is rooted in the supposedly absolute ontological heterogeneity of the Cartesian subject and his own body, the acknowledgment answering it must be taken not just as a redeeming subjective act towards the separated other, but as a more primordial ontological phenomenon, underlying the possibility of such an act and inscribing the materially meaningful relation to others—and to oneself as other—as a constitutive always-already dimension of subjectivity. Acknowledgment, as Cavell clearly states, "is the sort of concept Heidegger calls an *existentiale*" (Cavell 1976, 263–264), and it is in terms of such understanding thereof that we should read the famous provocative ending of "Knowing and Acknowledging": "I know you're in pain the way you do" (Cavell 1976, 266).

Such dimension of inherently meaningful material externality beyond the subject-object divide is, of course, not unproblematically given (skepticism, for Cavell, is a genuine problem), but is rather transcendently *claimed* in art. Acknowledgment, hence, is at the core of Cavell's theory of artistic medium, where it defines both the operation of the artwork articulating its material conditions (a painting speaking, as it were, of painting as such) and the spectator's judgment, accepting or rejecting it as an artwork—that is, an actual instance of medium-creation (Cavell 1979b, 109–110). The acknowledgment of the material conditions of meaning in the establishment of an automatism claims the mode of material meaningfulness underlying the acknowledgment of pain to be real and existentially determinative. In this sense, as Bernstein puts it, "modernist works of art mean the way body in pain means" (Bernstein 2006, 73). If so, we may speculate that it may be more than coincidental that it is with regard to the subject matter of physical suffering that Lessing has developed the paradigmatic argument of medium-essentialism in *Laocoön*. But then, isn't it the central image of Western art taken much broadly, about which Cavell states that "the crucified human body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul"? (Cavell 1979a, 430).

The fact that it is the "*unacknowledged* human soul" which is given image in the domain, where the possibility of acknowledgment is being worked out, betrays the ambiguity of artistic medium as its locus in Cavell's account. On the one hand, the acknowledgment of material conditions in a medium-

creation is precisely the acknowledgment of human personhood, as immanently present—and co-present with others—in the corporeal domain. It is as a model of nonalienated psychophysical unity that the artwork is, for Cavell, analogous to a person (Cavell 1976, 189). On the other hand, the artistic procedure involves “declaring the truth of skepticism,” which in this context means precisely the opposite: exposing the material conditions of meaning as essentially inadequate to the claims of such unity—that is, the existential experience of what acknowledgment is supposed to answer—risking thus the possibility of the artwork being no more than a thing, and the human body an automaton after all.<sup>7</sup>

Tellingly, in Cavell’s reading of Shakespeare, the material medium of sculpture, to which Othello compares Desdemona just before murdering her, figures as an image for his *failure* of acknowledgment: “a statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not” (Cavell 1979a, 496). Moving in the opposite direction, so to say—from sculpture to person—the experience of an artwork claims the overcoming of such failure to be possible. It does so by acknowledging the condition of “sheer that-ness,” common to the spectator and the work as material objects. So, for example, the acknowledgment of one’s “presentness,” which, according to Cavell, the “presentness” of such modernist painting as Pollock’s demands, is the acknowledgment of one’s partaking in the mode of embodied exteriority, which—compromising the self-sovereign Cartesian subjectivity—makes intimacy compatible with individuation (Cavell 1979b, 110–118). Similarly, the cinematic promise of overcoming metaphysical isolation runs through acknowledgment of what Cavell posits as one of the ontological necessities of the medium of film: showing “the world, in which human beings are not ontologically favored over the rest of nature” (Cavell 1979b, 37).<sup>8</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the ambiguous constitution of Cavell’s acknowledgment, especially in the context of film, can be productively linked to some aspects of Heidegger’s philosophy of art not discussed in this article: specifically, his notion of making explicit the technological understanding of beings as a necessary condition of its possible overcoming in art (Shmugliakov 2016). Pursuing, however, the very idea of artistic medium the two philosophers enable us to articulate, and holding that it is the transcendental understanding of materiality—i.e. not as a region of being, but as a condition of meaning—which grants the relevance of this idea to the diverse plurality of arts in the post-medium condition, I will attempt in the remaining pages of this paper to show how Cavell’s construal of the materialist problematic from the perspective of skepticism about other minds hangs

together with its Heideggerian interpretation in terms of concealment-unconcealed. The required synthesis, I believe, is best provided by briefly evoking Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of art—not by chance also mentioned in the last sentence of Krauss’s “Reinventing the Medium.”

Much like Cavell, Nancy construes the post-Cartesian materialist problematic by taking personal embodiment as its point of departure. Yet, according to Nancy’s deconstructivist approach, rather than barring the subject from the world and the others, the notorious mind-body dualism discovers the body as the constitutive non-identity of the thinking subject itself. Not only, Nancy argues, materiality conditions thinking (the cogito, he insists, is dependent in Descartes himself on the embodied actuality of pronunciation); the thinking subject *is* the misrecognition of these conditions (Nancy 2008, 25–33, 93–97). Such material constitution inevitably inscribes subjectivity in the exteriority of being with others—“the world of sense,” understood as a singular configuration of differentiated bodies, not unlike the ontological horizon of Cavell’s acknowledgment that covers the epistemological gap between my pain and yours. Accordingly, it is the possibility of “sense more ‘originary’ than any assignation of a ‘Self’ or ‘Other,’” which for Nancy defines the materialist stakes of art (Nancy 1998, 135). What, however, is especially important for us here is the understanding of materiality yielded by this account. In terms of Nancy’s appropriation of Descartes, matter is not *res extensa* as opposed to *res cogitans*, but the very fact of their constitutive differentiation: “the matter of real difference, the difference of the *res*” (Nancy 1996, 58). While sharing, as I have suggested, the existential concerns of Cavell’s argument, the notion of matter-as-difference is close to Heidegger’s notion of earth-as-concealment—both construing materiality transcendently, as a constitutive dimension of meaning as such.

Nancy’s version of this idea contributes two significant points to the theory of artistic medium we have developed so far. First, it substantiates the possibility, we have indeed recognized in Heidegger’s earth, to extend the notion of artistic medium, with the full weight of its transcendental significance, to any art whatsoever—including the most radically dematerialized conceptual art. Once this ontological point is adopted, the materiality of such art shouldn’t be reduced to the necessary-yet-insignificant aesthetic remainder, understood as the inescapable reliance of the work on spatio-temporal artifact(s) for presenting its essentially conceptual (i.e. immaterial) point. We should rather restate Henry Flynt’s definition of conceptual art as “an art of which the material is concepts” (Osborne 2013, 103), understanding it as taking to the extreme point of realization the fact that part of what makes any art art is its exposing

the material dimension of conceptuality itself (the double meaning of *sense*, as Nancy would have it). True, one may feel that such “thin” interpretation of materiality voids the concept of artistic medium from the flesh-and-blood corporeality with which the neo-modernist account of the quest for material meaning appears to invest it. But then we should remember that the same problem arises with regard to the medium of literature, the liminal materiality of which, as Nancy reminds, is precisely what made poetry the highest art in Hegel (Nancy 1996, 27). And could we make sense of Heidegger’s posing of “the naming power of the word” as supposedly an ontological equal of “the heaviness of the stone” or “the gleam of the ore,” otherwise than in terms of materiality defined by heterogeneity of self-differentiation, ontologically more primordial than either the picture of non-alienated nature or the “painful stuff” of modernist painting?

The second contribution of Nancy’s notion of materiality stems from its shift from concealment to difference in the interpretation of matter as transcendental opacity, conditioning the production of meaning. Regarded specifically from the perspective of “The Origin’s” model, this shift rearticulates the relation between the two dimensions of earth: the unity of a metaphysical principle and the multiplicity of media in which it unfolds. As much as differentiation implies plurality, the heterogeneous variety of media, which Heidegger seems to be taking for granted, becomes for Nancy a direct ontological implication of the principle they acknowledge. Furthermore, reinterpreted as difference, concealment is not just the element constitutively negated in the event of unconcealment—or even the inexhaustible source erupting within it—but the metaphysical locomotive of the eventual productivity itself, making the plurality of worlds implied in the very concept of art. Accordingly, the Cavellian circularity of the medium, which in terms of Heidegger’s model we have identified as artwork’s material conditions conceived “out of the event”—that is, as a particular case of its paradoxical self-conditioning—for Nancy, belongs specifically with their material ontology: the “*hyletic circle*’ meaning the circle of the self-relation of the material differentiation as such, or of matter as differentiation itself.” Art—always already happening as the irreducible plurality of the arts—Nancy further argues, is “properly the mode of . . . constitutive presentation . . . of this originary circle” (Nancy 1996, 14–15).

But if this is so, then “the expansion to infinity of the possible material means of art-making” by which we have seen Osborne characterize the post-medium condition, is rooted in the materialist ontology constitutive of art as art. Accordingly, the resistance of the specific to the generic, at issue in Krauss’s normative framing of this expansion as the task of reinventing the medium,

belongs to art’s transcendental significance. Our archeological construal of the idea of artistic medium has exposed its overlooked persistence throughout what is usually seen as paradigm shifts in the understanding of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—from Heidegger, for whom the system of the arts was taken for granted, to Cavell, whose philosophy is partially a response to this system’s crisis, to Krauss celebrating its breakdown. The reason for this continuity is that the idea of artistic medium, as we have presented it, is an intrinsic dimension of our idea of art.

## Notes

1. Krauss acknowledges this influence, when she begets her seminal *Voyage* by considering Cavell’s *automatism* as a terminological alternative to *medium*, and crediting him for discovering the internal plurality of the phenomenon (Krauss 2000, 6). An important attempt to think this dialogue through, while reaching rather different conclusions than those I draw here, has been undertaken in: Costello 2012. Prioritizing convention over material support in the constitution of artistic medium, Costello understands Krauss’s reinvented medium as essentially restricted to an individual artistic project—which makes it incompatible with the communicative aspect he takes to be central in Cavell’s doctrine of automatism. My reading, in contrast, substantiates the common ground of the two positions, by deploying the material ontology of the medium as the site of evental—that is, non-subjective—production of artistic convention.
2. See, for example: Costello (2008), 234–312.
3. This is of course, not to say that Cavell does not pronounce some crucially important statements regarding the question “What is art?”. The two most explicit examples I think of address its “grammatical” relation to other questions. In “Music Discomposed” Cavell says that “the answer to the question ‘What is art?’ will in part be an answer which explains why it is we treat certain objects, or how we can treat certain objects, in ways normally reserved to treating persons” (Cavell 1976, 189). The pursuit of the (importance of the) cinematic medium in *The World Viewed* begins with the claim that “the answer to the question ‘What is the importance of art?’ is grammatically related to, or is a way of answering, the question ‘What is art?’” (Cavell 1979b, 4) These gnomic statements, contributing to the pursuit of the question in a sort of metonymical mode, are fully compatible, as I hope will become clear, with the more explicit Heideggerian answer, which frames my argument here. Indeed, the latter point, as I see it, abbreviates a necessary aspect of the world-dimension of Heidegger’s model discussed in this section. The former, as we shall see, belongs to the heart of Cavell’s view of the importance of artistic medium for the importance of art in this model.
4. In “The Origin” Heidegger mentions several modes in which concealment, made manifest in the work of art, inconspicuously persists in the ordinary experience: the inherent partiality of the showing themselves of phenomena, the unmastered that conditions all human projects, etc (Heidegger 2002, 29–31). Heidegger also speaks of concealment as “the originating region of the



not-yet-disclosed” (Heidegger 2002, 36), which makes some commentators interpret it “substantially,” as another term for Being or being-as-such, understood as a kind of inexhaustible ontological reservoir of what comes to be unconcealed in artistic events (Thomson 2011, 70, 90). The “transcendental” reading of the term, operative in my argument, in contrast, emphasizes the status of concealment as a *condition* of meaning, acknowledged in the artistic event.

5. For another, rather different materialist reading of Cavell’s medium, see: Hajnal (2016), 190–246.
6. My presentation, of course, does not exhaust the complex relation between the external world skepticism and other minds skepticism in Cavell. The former requires a distinct gesture of *accepting* the world, complementary and irreducible to *acknowledging* directed to persons (and artworks) (Cavell 1976, 324). Yet, however one chooses to construe the relation between the two, other minds skepticism is the more fundamental in Cavell’s project, as it more directly reveals the existential stakes of skepticism *tout court* and the inadequacy of tackling it in purely epistemological terms. For detailed discussion of the relation between the two kinds of skepticism in Cavell, see: Goodman (1985); and: Moran (2017), 122–135. For a recent elaboration of the issue in a film-philosophical context, see: Pippin (2020), 171–199.
7. For a detailed analysis of this procedure, see: Bernstein (2006), 102–105.
8. Although my aim in the current study is to establish the notion of material acknowledgment as part of the ontology of artistic medium as such—that is, a dimension pertaining to our very idea of art—its more specific theoretical elaborations in art history and film studies, to which this essay could only briefly refer, should be understood as another necessary dimension of the phenomenon at stake. As an example of the first, let us mention Michael Fried’s *Menzel’s Realism* (Fried 2002), which maneuvers an in-depth interpretation of the artist’s work as a theoretical reorientation of pictorial modernism from the “optical conception” to the one centered on a notion of embodiment, namely “imaginative projections of bodily experience” shared—or, we may want to say, *acknowledged*—by the spectator (Fried 2002, 13). As an example of the second—an example, importantly, much farther from Cavell, and thus supportive of the universality I take the ontological basis of this critical project to possess—one could think of Steven Shaviro’s *The Cinematic Body* (Shaviro 1993) which conducts an interpretation of such different filmmakers as David Cronenberg, Jerry Lewis, and Katherine Bigelow, in terms that forego the theoretical notions of signification and disembodies gaze in favor of embodied, visceral affectations of fear, laughter, or disgust.

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