

**Kant at the La Ciotat Station:
the Arrival of the Lumière's Train**

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Kant at the La Ciotat Station: the Arrival of the Lumière's Train

Hence it is no longer as certain as it was that there is no middle stage between presence and absence. ... It is false to say that the screen is incapable of putting us 'in the presence of' the actor. It does so in the same way as a mirror - one must agree that the mirror relays the presence of the person reflected in it – but it is a mirror with a delayed reflection, the tin foil of which retains the image. It is true that in the theatre Molière can die on the stage and that we have the privilege of living in the biographical time of the actor. In the film about Manolete however we are present at the actual death of the famous matador and while our emotion may not be as deep as if we were actually present in the arena at that historic moment, its nature is the same. . . . Everything takes place as if in the time-space perimeter which is the definition of presence.

Andre Bazin [1951]¹

The cinema is a language which expresses reality with reality. So the question is: What is the difference between the cinema and reality? Practically none.

Pier Paolo Pasolini [?]²

Psychological evidence strongly supports the contention that we learn to recognize what a picture stands for as soon as we have become able to recognize the objects, or kinds of objects, that serve as the models for that picture. Picture recognition is not a skill acquired over and above object recognition. Whatever features or cues we come to employ in object recognition, we also mobilize to recognize what pictures depict. A child raised without pictorial representations will, after being shown a couple of pictures, be able to identify the referent of any standard picture of a kind of object with which he or she is familiar. The rapid development of this picture-recognition capacity contrasts strongly with the acquisition of a symbol system such as a language.

J. E. Hochberg and V. Brooks [1962]³

¹ Andre Bazin, "Theater and Cinema – Part II", pages 95-124 of *What is Cinema?* (Volume I), essays selected and translated by Hugh Grey (Berkeley: the University of California Press, 1967), pages 97 and 98.

² Quoted in Oswald Stack's *Pasolini on Pasolini* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), page 29.

³ From J. E. Hochberg and V. Brooks, "Pictorial Recognition as an Unlearned Ability", *American Journal of Psychology*, no. 75 (1962), pages 624-628. [Paragraph as quoted by Noël

Pictures have a double reality. Drawings, paintings and photographs are objects in their own right patterns on a flat sheet and at the same time entirely different objects to the eye. We see both a pattern of marks on paper, with shading, brush-strokes or photographic 'grain', and at the same time we see the these compose a face, a house or a ship on a stormy sea. Pictures are unique among objects; for they are seen both as themselves and as some other things, entirely different from the paper or canvas of the picture. Pictures are paradoxes. ... No object can be in two places at the same time; no object can lie in two- and three-dimensional space. Yet pictures are both visibly flat and three-dimensional. They are a certain size, yet also the size of a face of a house or a ship. Pictures are impossible.

Richard Gregory [1970]⁴

Yet this seems, ontologically, to be what is happening when we look at a photograph: we see things that are not present. ... Someone will object: "That is playing with words. We're not seeing something not present; we are looking at something perfectly present, namely, a *photograph*." But that is affirming something I have not denied. On the contrary, I am precisely describing, or wishing to describe, what it means to say that there is this photograph here. It may be felt that I make too great a mystery of these objects. My feeling is rather that we have forgotten how mysterious these things are, and in general how *different* things are from one another, as though we had forgotten how to value them. This is in fact something movies teach us.

Stanley Cavell [1971]⁵

Prologue

I begin with a puzzle from the history of philosophy followed by another from the history of filmmaking and its theories. The conundra appear unconnected. Upon examination, however, they will prove to encompass a common confusion about identity claims, and the solution to the first will provide the clue to the solution of the second.

Carroll, *Mystifying Movies: Fads & Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), page 139.]

⁴ Richard Gregory, *The Intelligent Eye* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), page 32.

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: the Viking Press, 1971), pages 18 and 19.

As we shall see, the histories of philosophy and film theory are littered with the debris left by those who have thought incautiously about identity. Identity is a tough topic, of course, requiring for penetration both more care and more audacity than philosophers have heretofore given to it. If I am correct, then we must radically realign our logical and epistemological sensitivities to get it right, for I suspect that most of the unresolved problems of philosophy rest at root upon incompatible identity claims – and identity claims, as we shall see, are immune to refutation.

Small wonder, then, that the classical problems of philosophy resist solution. Small wonder, as well, that the core problem of classical film theory remains unresolved. That's what confusion is all about. Let's see how and why.

A Puzzle from the History of Philosophy

In 1787 Kant published the second edition of his first 'critique', the *Kritic der reinen Vernunft*, that had appeared six years earlier in 1781. Kant was to write other books following his long silence of the 1770s, all of them important and most of them controversial, but this was the only one that he reissued in a revised edition.

Why did Kant believe that a revised edition might be useful? He insisted within it that he had changed his mind about nothing essential and indeed represented the bulk of the book unaltered. He rewrote the Deduction and the section on the Paralogisms, however and then added a major Preface that bore little resemblance to the original, for within it he addressed directly the fundamental misconception by many of his critics of the identity upon which his entire work rested.

What had Kant said originally? and what had his critics mistakenly construed him to have said? Thankfully, we need not probe deeply into Kantian exegesis, for the error was glaring, and one would be hard-pressed to find a clearer example of identities confused and the lessons to be learned therefrom

Kant fundamental notion was simple and can be simply exemplified. When we encounter a book, we may encounter the front, the back or one of its sides or perhaps the top or pages 4 and 5 of the interior. While doing so, however, we never see simultaneously its front, back, sides and the tops of pages 4, 5, 23 and 24. Why not? Because, as Kant said, we are constrained spatially. But we are not only constrained spatially, for we also see the book as it is but never as it was or will be. Why not? Because, again as Kant said, we are constrained temporally as well. Space and time, in Kant's phrase, were thus forms of intuition constraining not only how objects appear to

us but also how they fit within the categories, such as causality, by which we think of them.

We need only ponder the example of the book, however, to realise, as Kant did, that we can think of a being who, unlike ourselves, would be unconstrained spatially and temporally. Such a being (Kant's 'God'), unimaginable but thinkable, would encounter the same book that we do but would do so by registering its front, back, side, top, interior, exterior, past, present and future within a single encounter. Such a being, that is, would encounter the very same objects and events that we encounter within our world, but, being unconstrained spatially and temporally (and hence unconstrained causally as well), it would encounter them differently.

The singleness of the world and its objects, however differently encounterable, lay at the core of Kant's account within the first edition of his first *Kritik*, and obviously so, or so he must have thought when writing of it. But what happened to it? Many readers of the first edition, caught up in complexities, reasoned as follows:⁶ the book-as-it-appears-to-us is spatial, temporal and causal, whereas the book-as-it-is-in-itself (that is, the book as it would be encountered by a being unconstrained as we are) would be nonspatial, nontemporal and noncausal. The first book must therefore be distinct from the second, for it has different properties. The world as encountered by us – the phenomenal world – must therefore be a different world from the one encountered by the unconstrained being – the noumenal world. Thus, they argued, Kant's ontology encompasses two distinct worlds having no possible coherent interrelationship between them. (It couldn't be a causal relationship, for example, for only the phenomenal world has causes.) Kant's epistemology is therefore incoherent at its core.

But Kant, unlike his critics, had used no hyphens! He had never spoken of a book-as-it-appears versus a book-as-it-is-in-itself. Rather, he had spoken of a single object – a book – encounterable in diverse ways: a book as encountered spatially, temporally and causally by us in contrast to the same book as it would be encountered nonspatially, nontemporally and noncausally by a being unconstrained as we are.

In the Preface to the second edition, Kant made his point transparently clear: he was speaking of a single book, differently encounterable, rather than two.

... we can therefore have no knowledge of any object as thing in itself, but only in so far as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is, an appearance ... the distinction, which our Critique has shown to be necessary [is] between things as objects of experience and those same things as things in themselves ... the object is to be taken in a twofold sense, namely as appearance and as thing in

⁶ Here, as before, I use an imaginary sighting of a 'book' as exemplary.

itself ... the principle of causality therefore applies only to things taken in the former sense, namely, in so far as they are objects of experience – these same objects, taken in the other sense, not being subject to the principle ... (Bxxvi and Bxxvii).

Why, then, has the confusion persisted to this day? Kant had implied in the first edition, as he reaffirmed explicitly in his preface to the second edition, that the things that we can encounter only as they 'appear' are the *same things* that God can encounter as they are 'in themselves'! The book that I encounter on my desktop as it 'appears' is the *same book* that God encounters as it is 'in itself', even though we encounter it differently. As Kant put it, the book is encounterable 'in a two-fold sense': we, constrained as we are, must encounter it as it 'appears' spatially, temporally and causally; God, on the other hand, can encounter it as it is 'in itself' free of the spatially, temporal and causal constraints that restrict us.

Kant was claiming that we must encounter the book *differently* than God does. Kant's critics, on the other hand, were insisting that if we must encounter the book as spatial, temporal and causal whereas the book as encountered by God is otherwise, we and God must be encountering *different* books rather than the same book differently.

Who was right? Kant! – and the methodological moral deserves attention.

Having made an identity claim, Kant was construing differences adverbially. We and God are encountering the same book differently, as evident by our use of different adverbs when describing how differently we encounter it. Kant's critics, denying the identity, were construing them adjectivally. We and God are encountering different books, or so they supposed, as evident by the use of different adjectives when describing their distinct attributes.

Both positions were coherent; each could be maintained come what may. But hidden within the dispute was an epistemological implication of enormous methodological significance not only for understanding the resistance to refutation of Kant's position but also for understanding the persistent wrangling among film theorists over the ontology of the cinematic image.

If a claimant is willing to construe all differences adverbially, identity claims are irrefutable.

Before unpacking this suggestion further, let's anchor our discussion within the context of how we see events by means of movies and photographs.

A Puzzle from the History of Filmmaking

In 1895 Louis Lumière stood on a quay in the railway station at La Ciotat in southern France awaiting the arrival of a train. Beside him stood a curious machine that he had constructed, one of the first motion picture cameras. As the train pulled into the station, Lumière aimed his camera and turned the crank. The train rolled to a stop and the passengers disembarked, walking past the camera and into the depot. Finally, having exhausted his reel of film, Lumière stopped cranking the camera.

Several months later, on 28 December 1895, thirty-five persons gathered in the Salon Indien in the basement of the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris having purchased tickets to the first paid public screenings in a 'cinema'. During the evening a roll of film printed from the strip exposed at the train station was placed inside the machine now converted into a projector. The lights were dimmed, the projector's lamp was lit, the spectators gazed at a screen hung at the end of the room and the projectionist began to crank the projector.

Let's pause to ponder a key question, namely what did the members of the audience see as they peered subsequently at the screen in the darkened room? Or, more precisely,

What *kinds* of objects did they encounter visually as they focused their eyes upon the variably illuminated screen hanging before them?⁷

Many in the audience that evening were no doubt friends or acquaintances of Lumière, technically aware of the process and eager to witness the results. They knew that one of the things they were encountering was the surface of the screen hanging before them, variably illuminated by the focused flashes of light being emitted intermittently by the projector. No serious thinker known to me has ever disagreed.

From eyewitness accounts, however, we know that the members of the audience thought they were encountering at exactly the same time objects of another kind as well, namely a train pulling into the station and passengers disembarking, walking from the train and exiting the quay – the *same* train, station, passengers and quay that Lumière had encountered some months before.

⁷ Throughout this book, I shall use the word 'encounter' as a precise equivalent to Kant's 'Anschauung', a term usually translated into English, with appropriate misgivings, as 'intuition'. The comprehension of Kant by students, and by many scholars as well, would be immeasurably advanced were the noun 'intuition' and the verb 'to intuit' to be banned from all translations and the words 'encounter' and 'to encounter' put in their place.

The members of Lumière's audience a century ago were making an assumption that has guided ever after the thinking of every powerful filmmaker and every thinker who has influenced the course of filmmaking: by means of a film we may encounter objects and events that are not only of common kind to those encountered in the world about us, but sometimes, as in Lumière's case, *identical* to them.

Remarkably, however, many commentators about filmmaking and its theories, indeed most, have disagreed with them! Most commentators known to me have implied that the members of Lumière's audience could never have seen the train, the station, passengers disembarking or the quay by means of his film. Rather, they must have been seeing something else – something peculiar and peculiarly illusory.

Different words have been used by commentators to describe what was seen.⁸ Indeed, the history of film theory has been largely a battle waged over what word would best complete the following sentence:

The people in the Lumières' audience saw a _____ of the train pulling into the station.

Some have argued that the word 'photograph' or 'movie' or 'film' ought to be inserted; others have recommended the word 'image'; still others 'representation', 'presentation', 'reproduction', 'picture', 'depiction', 'model', 'signifier', even 'imaginary signifier' or 'illusion'. And all, with the inconsistent exceptions of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer (and perhaps later Cavell, and more recently Scruton and Walton),⁹ have agreed that the following sentence must be untenable:

⁸ Throughout this chapter I shall refrain from naming film theorists guilty of the transgressions I impute to members of their class or citing samples of their logic-free arguments. Incautious readers might therefore assume that I am in danger of flailing at windmills. Thankfully, however, as the literature of film theory everywhere attests, the broad positions that I attack are so prevalent that readers may be left free to choose their own best examples. To do more would be to draw attention to the genesis of the confusion rather than its logic, and that should be the subject of an historical and thus distinct investigation.

⁹ Andre Bazin's ontological conjectures are scattered throughout the essays encompassed in *What is Cinema?* (Volume I) selected and translated by Hugh Grey (Berkeley: the University of California Press, 1967); and Siegfried Kracauer's may be found in his *Theory of Film: the Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Stanley Cavell's clearest account to date occurs in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (original edition: New York: the Viking Press, 1971); Roger Scruton's in "Photography and Representation", *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 7, 1981, pages 577-603; and Kendall Walton's in "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism", *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 11,

The people in the Lumières' audience saw the *train* pulling into the station.

Puzzling, isn't it? For, by all accounts, that is what the members of the audience *thought* they saw.

The puzzle deepens when generalized. Humans have been viewing motion pictures for over a century and reacting as if they were thereby able to encounter objects and events occurring in places other than the room in which the screenings were taking place. Concurrently, filmmakers have asked themselves questions of *epistemological* significance, namely how ought movies to be written, designed, shot, directed, edited and projected to enable audiences to best comprehend the events seen thereby?

At the same time, however, most film theorists have denied the presumption, obsessed with an *ontological* question.

When humans encounter a cinematic event, what *kind* of event could it be?

Most theorists, unable theoretically to believe their own eyes, have presupposed that ontology must be logically prior to epistemology. They have presumed, it seems, that until one has decided what kind of events cinematic or photographic events are, one cannot ask the epistemological questions precisely, for such questions, as commonly put, presuppose that humans can see by means of movies or photographs what humans have uniformly thought they were seeing (dogs and cats, trees and flowers, bloodied faces, tearful eyes, etc.).

The result? For over a century, as filmmakers have fashioned powerful movies, film theory has degenerated into a trivial pursuit.¹⁰ Why? What in particular has sustained the recurring debate among film theorists since 1895 concerning the ontological status of the cinematic event? What conceptual error has rendered it unresolvable? for clearly an intellectual controversy must rest upon a deep-rooted confusion to have persisted for so long unresolved.

The general answer, I suggest, is that most film theorists have failed to comprehend one of the cardinal lessons of 20th-century philosophy, namely, that

1984, pages 246-277 and "Looking Again Through Photographs: A Response to Edwin Martin", *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 12, 1986, pages 801-808.

¹⁰ I speak politely. Others (obviously non-Canadian) have been blunt. As Alexander Sesonske recently put it, "contemporary film theory is an intellectual disaster." (*The Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, Volume 47, Number 3: Summer, 1989; page 285.)

Epistemological questions are epistemologically prior to ontological ones.

One must begin with the best-tested beliefs of which we are aware (epistemology) and only then inquire as to what kind of objects must exist if they are true (ontology).¹¹ Our ontologies must be inferred from our epistemologies rather than the reverse.

Had this lesson been learned by film theorists, much waste would have been avoided (including the rampant confusions of the "realist-formalist" controversy deriving from this ontological bias; see note 13 below). The lesson has resisted learning, however, for it comes shrouded in exactly the same confusion that misled the critics of Kant – a misconstrual of the logic of identity.

Let's focus our attention upon it by means of a thought-experiment centred for simplicity upon how we see things by means of photographs.

A Thought-Experiment

I walk into a large room within the main house of a Canadian country estate. On the walls are hanging photographs of relatives and friends of the family, among them one of an elderly gentlemen scowling crossly at the photographer.¹²

A ten-year-old girl enters the room, introducing herself as the daughter of the couple who own the house. After exchanging pleasantries, I point to the photograph of the old man and ask if she knows who he is? "That's my Grandpa", she replies. When I suggest that he looks annoyed and must have been quite old at the time, she nods, adding that her mother says that he never liked having his photograph taken, and the photographer had surprised him. "The picture was taken at his last birthday party", she says, adding after a pause, "I never met him. He died before I was born."

The above conversation is common enough. The young girl responds naturally to my questions, each of us assuming that, by means of the photograph, we are able to see

¹¹ Willard Quine in particular has spent much of his life teaching this lesson. For quick immersion see the key essays in *From a Logical Point of View* (2nd revised edition published in Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) and in *Ontological Relativity & Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

¹² I shall for clarity speak here of photographs rather than movies or videotapes. The transition from a photographic example more simply described to cinematic cases complicated by motion will be transparent, for the logic of the argument are identical.

her grandfather as he stood in a room, glaring at a photographer during a birthday party more than a decade ago.

As noted above, of course, many serious thinkers have denied the assumption. But what if the young girl means what she says, has a fund of logical wit and is unintimidated by the weight of critical tradition? What if, that is, she believes the following?

- A. The world within which she lives, moves and has her being has encompassed two objects, albeit for the most part non-concurrently.
 - 1. Her grandfather (a human being, now deceased, who weighed scarcely sixty kilograms on his last birthday, stood one-hundred-and-seventy centimetres tall, was of mild complexion and generally foul temper, etc.); and
 - 2. The photograph of her grandfather now hanging on the wall (a black-and-white rectangular object, twenty-eight by thirty-six centimetres, garishly framed, weighing perhaps five-hundredes grams, etc.).
- B. Her grandfather and the photograph of him are *different objects*.

[Keep B in mind as you read the remainder of this essay, for its presence as a premise reduces to nonsense the commonplace insistence of commentators that viewers who claim to see by means of a photograph the object photographed, as our young girl does, must somehow be conflating the photograph with the object.]
- C. When looking at the photograph of her grandfather, she sees the photograph of her grandfather..
- D. When looking at the photograph of her grandfather, however, she thereby sees her grandfather as well.

Our young girl is affirming, in other words, that by seeing the photograph of her grandfather, she can see an object, her grandfather, distinct from the photograph by which she sees him. By seeing the photograph of grandfather, she is able *by the same act of perception* to see her grandfather as he stood a dozen years ago in a room within which his last birthday was being celebrated.

Note carefully! The young girl is claiming that she can see, by means of a photograph hanging on a wall in a room within which she is standing, her grandfather as he stood within a *different* room at a *different* time – the room and time within which his last birthday party was occurring. The photograph and her grandfather are distinct objects (remember B above?), and only the photograph is hanging before her in the room within which she stands. By looking at the photograph, however, she sees her grandfather in another time and place. She has never been in the same room with him. Indeed, she has never met the man. She's only seen him by means of his photograph.

Logically speaking, the young girl is affirming an *identity*.

She is claiming to see something when looking at the photograph of her grandfather, distinct from the photograph, that she would otherwise have never been able to see, and is *identifying* this other object that she sees with her grandfather.

Her claim, carefully considered, is fascinating, for it is immune not only from the classical counterarguments of critics but from counterarguments altogether – as are all identity claims, carefully considered.

Let's look in passing at the failure of the classical counterarguments then in detail at the peculiar epistemological status of identity claims.

The Failure of Counterarguments

The young girl has affirmed that, by means of a photograph, she can see an object in the world distinct from the photograph.¹³ Many writers on film and photography, unable to believe their eyes, have rested their counterarguments on the simple suggestion, believed mistakenly to be validated by common sense, that to see a photograph of one's dead grandfather precludes seeing one's grandfather simultaneously, failing to notice that the premise does not entail the conclusion.

¹³ Many film theorists, especially those fond of distinguishing 'realists' from others (from 'formalists', for example), would presume that our young girl is thereby making a 'realistic' claim. Her claim would be 'realistic', however, only if she believed that the objects she had seen and identified were 'real'. If, on the contrary, she, like Berkeley, were to construe them as 'ideal', then her claim would be 'idealistic' rather than 'realistic'. Her claim, in short, is neutral with respect to the dominant distinctions of contemporary film theory (ontologically biased one-and-all).

Some writers, of course, have attempted to evade the logical gap. They have proceeded in one of three ways.

By arguing that since grandfathers have different properties than photographs of grandfathers, seeing the latter precludes thereby seeing the former;

By arguing that since grandfathers are different causal agents than photographs of grandfathers, the effects caused by them (that is, seeing grandfather) could never be identical; or

By arguing that since photographs of grandfathers may cause us to misidentify the grandfathers seen thereby, we ought never to identify the grandfathers seen by means of photographs with the grandfathers.

I shall refer to the first as Arguments from Diverse Stimuli, to the second as Arguments from Diverse Causes and to the third as Arguments from Mistaken Identity. All are invalid. Let's see how.

Arguments from Diverse Stimuli:

How often writers point out that photographs are often black-and-white, two-dimensional, subject to shape distortions due to lens aberrations, perceptually grainy, etc., whereas the objects photographed, if otherwise seen, would be fully coloured, three-dimensional, non-distorted and without grain, concluding that we ought never to identify the objects seen by means of photographs with the objects photographed!

The argument, generalized, is that registering diverse visual stimuli must entail seeing diverse objects. (Or, conversely put, that identity of visual stimuli is a prerequisite for identification of the objects seen.) The argument is invalid, of course, and trivially so. Were identity of visual stimuli required before identifying objects seen, we should never have been able to identify anything we have seen:

- a. I glance at the tree in my front yard, turn away and then glance again at the tree. The stimuli received during the second glance are diverse, if only temporally, from those received during the first glance, yet I see the same tree with the second glance as with the first.
- b. I look at the tree as I leave the house in the morning and do so again as I return in the evening. The stimuli received are different, but the tree is the same.

- c. I cover my left eye with a patch and thus see the tree two-dimensionally rather than three-dimensionally. But I see the same tree differently rather than a different tree.
- d. I put on dark glasses. I see the same tree darkly rather than a different tree.

Were identity of stimuli required for identification of objects seen, I should never have seen the same tree on any of the above occasions. Indeed, I should never have been able to identify anything that I have seen. Such a construal of the world may be logically coherent but hardly pragmatically feasible, for identification of objects is a prerequisite of perceiving any world at all – as Kant would have insisted.

Under what conditions do we identify objects in the world? We identify objects seen through dark glasses, tinted windows, damaged eyes, different eyes, different stimuli, by different persons, through microscopes and telescopes, etc.. None of these preclude our identifying of the objects seen.

But we needn't multiply examples, for the moral is clear. One may assuredly impose criteria of identity upon objects seen by means of photographs or movies, but can never on pain of nonsense impose criteria that would render impossible identification of objects as ordinarily seen in the world! Obviously, identity of stimuli is too strong a criterion.¹⁴

When viewing the photograph of her grandfather, our young girl is indeed seeing her grandfather as constrained by the properties of the photograph. She sees her grandfather black-and-whitely, two-dimensionally, grainily, and perhaps subject to distortions of shape. She never, however, sees a black-and-white, two-dimensional, grainy, or distorted *grandfather*, just as seeing him darkly through dark glasses would never entail that he has suddenly become darker than he is! *How* she sees her grandfather is constrained by the properties of the photograph, but the properties of the photograph are never properties of *what* she sees (that is, her grandfather).

As noted above, this is the same confusion of adverbs with adjectives that plagued the critics of Kant, and as shall be pointed out below, no diversity of received stimuli could

¹⁴ Much of a movie's value depends often upon the non-identity of the stimuli received when viewing objects by means of it rather than viewing the objects directly. When a scientist views a film of an event taken in slow-motion, for example, she identifies what she sees by means of film with the event that was photographed as it happened in the world. But it is precisely the ability of the film to transmit stimuli that differ from those that she could have received if viewing the event directly that renders the exercise valuable.

ever be sufficient to entail non-identity of objects seen. But we have said enough to render the Arguments from Diverse Stimuli impotent.

Arguments from Diverse Causes:

As our young girl has affirmed (premise (B)) that her grandfather is distinct from his photograph. He is a different object and has therefore assuredly caused some different effects.

The arguments from diverse causes, however, conclude that our young girl could never have seen her grandfather by seeing his photograph, for the effect of seeing her grandfather could only have been caused by looking at him, never by looking at his photograph. He is an object, the photograph another, and the difference *entails* the non-identity of the effects they have caused.

The arguments come nuanced in diverse ways. Some authors stress that the objects seen by means of photographs and movies have been conditioned by different choices than those that condition events otherwise seen (choices of camera positioning by directors, cinematographers, or photographers; choices of lenses by the same; choices of location by producers or directors; etc.). Many point out that the events that cause us to see things by means of movies or photographs (frames of celluloid intermittently projected, for example, or emulsions distributed across sheets of paper; etc.) are distinct from the events that would have enabled to see those things directly. Hence, they conclude, since the causes are different, the effects must be different, and thus we cannot be seeing by means of movies or photographs the things we claim to see.

The arguments, once again, are one and all invalid, for counterexamples abound.

I am thrice driven around the block in my friend's new automobile, subject to his choices of direction and speed. Nevertheless, the house that I see recurrently as we circle about – however subject my viewing may be to his choices – remains my house and not someone else's.

You and I enter a room, walk on opposite sides from the back to the front and then glance at a portrait on the wall before us. You are wearing thick glasses, I none. Nevertheless, we see the same portrait. We have no difficulty whatsoever, that is, in identifying the portrait that we see despite our viewings of it having been conditioned by choices and objects unique to each of us.

Once again, we needn't multiply counterexamples to reconfirm the invalidity of the arguments. Perhaps, however, we should ponder briefly the *general form* of the argument, namely, that different causes cannot have identical effects, for so many have overlooked for so long its transparent invalidity. Any quantum physicist could readily provide counterexamples to it (nonidentical events causing identical effects, for example, or even identical events causing nonidentical effects), but we needn't rely on events of subatomic dimensions for enlightenment. A simple thought-experiment from everyday life will again do as well.

Imagine that I were to walk into my office, sit in the chair in the corner and, by glancing across the room, see to my surprise the Prime Minister of Canada, drink in hand, standing in a garden on a late afternoon, relaxing for moment while seemingly awaiting the arrival of others. Were I to report the phenomenon imprecisely to someone in authority, suggesting erroneously that I had seen the Prime Minister standing *in my office*, I might well and rightly be shipped off to a mental institution, for my claim could never survive the reality testing to which I and others remain committed by our encounters with other things in the room and elsewhere.

Suppose, however, I were to correct the report, reassuring others that, although I had indeed as I sat in a chair in my office seen the Prime Minister, I had never seen him standing *in my office* but rather standing somewhere in a garden. I might still and rightly be incarcerated, for my identity claim has withstood no tests comparable to those to which I and others could have submitted objects in the room or elsewhere simply by moving among them.

Suppose, however, I were to return to my office a short time later accompanied by several observers, every one of whom, when seated in the chair and glancing across the room, could see the Prime Minister of Canada standing before the same rose bush in the same garden but having now been joined by a small group of advisors. Suppose, further, that one of the observers, a close friend of the Prime Minister familiar with the residence and garden, were to call the residence while watching and ask to be connected to him, only to be told by a voice on the phone that the Prime Minister does not wish to be disturbed. Recognising the caller, however, the owner of the voice, glancing through a window onto the garden and noting that the meeting is about to conclude, begins to describe what the Prime Minister and his visitors are doing – the description matching exactly what the observer is seeing of it while seated within my office.

My identity claim would now have become of surpassing interest! Whereas it had earlier appeared useless, it would now have survived a reproducible test rendering our seeing of the Prime Minister a phenomenon, as yet unexplained, suitable for scientific scrutiny.

Serious thinkers would now be obliged to ascertain testably how in the world it is possible for observers to see what the Prime Minister of Canada is doing *either* by observing him from a contiguous place within whatever space he happens to be occupying *or* by entering my office, sitting in the corner chair and glancing across the room? What laws govern the diverse causal chains? And so forth.

The moral of the story is obvious: identity claims are epistemologically *prior* to causal attribution. An identity claim, once affirmed, may stimulate causal analysis, and causal analysis may compel us to forego an identity claim no longer useful; but causal analysis can provide no *counterexample* to an identity claim.

Until the young girl and I have agreed that the object seen by means of the photograph of her grandfather is her grandfather, we can bring no causal evidence to bear on the situation. Once we have agreed upon the identity, however, we may then fruitfully ask all sorts of questions concerning techniques that the photographer might have used to render the identity clearer, more trustworthy, less subject to extraneous information, etc.. The lesson can be succinctly summarized.

Identifying must precede causal analysis!

The maxim, if kept resolutely in mind, will immunize one forever from the contagion of the fallacies inhering in the Arguments from Diverse Causes.

Arguments from Mistaken Identity:

Many authors have suggested, quite correctly, that objects and events seen by means of movies or photographs are frequently misidentified. Sometimes this is due to the peculiar manner in which some subjects behave when knowingly being photographed, rendering atypical the object later seen by means of the film or photograph. (The young girl's grandfather, for example, unusually upset by being photographed, may have acted so atypically before the camera that unknowledgeable persons may have difficulty identifying him with the person seen later by means of his photograph.)

Misidentification is especially common when objects are seen by means of movies or television, for objects thus seen are encountered commonly within a context of events created by editing, and the point of editing, as every propaganda filmmaker can attest, is to reinforce misleading identifications.

The Arguments from Mistaken Identity, therefore, unlike those previously considered, deserve careful consideration, for they encompass cautions that are reliable and fruitful.

They suggest that accurate identification of the objects seen by means of movies or photographs may be difficult, and ought not to be casually assumed. As arguments against the *possibility* of accurate identification, however, they are as fallacious as those already considered. Were it indeed impossible for us ever to identify accurately objects seen by means of movies or photographs, we could never misidentify them either.

The advocates of such arguments are therefore quite right when pointing toward the difficulties of identifying objects accurately when seen by means of movies or photographs. Unfortunately, they fail to notice that the situation is no worse than when attempting to identify objects seen directly. The difficulties of the latter are so common that they are commonly overlooked, but they arise from the same condition – lack of adequate information – that provokes us to misidentify objects encountered by means of movies or photographs; and the same means are available to the photographer or filmmaker to overcome the difficulties as are available to us when trying to avoid misidentifying objects in our ordinary encounters with them – provision of adequate information. With care we may provide information that is sufficiently accurate to get about the asymptotic business of identification.

Imagine, for example, that I am walking down a corridor. As I pass quickly by an open doorway, I catch a glimpse of what appears to be a robbery in progress. Am I right in my identification? I shouldn't be too confident, for my glimpse was too short.

Suppose, however, that I had stopped in the doorway and watched the proceedings for ten seconds or so. Would I then be right in my conjecture? My confidence would increase, for I have more information to rely upon. But I could still be wrong.

What, then, if I were to have paused in the doorway unseen for one minute. Would I then be right in my identification of the event underway? Again, my confidence would increase with more information; but again I could be wrong.

Suppose, instead, I were to have watched the proceedings for fifteen minutes. Could I then automatically assume that my judgement was correct? I would have much more information against which to test it, but I could still be wrong. (Perhaps the people are professionals hired to test a security system; perhaps they are actors in a complex practical joke at my expense; etc.)

The moral again is clear: identifications of objects and events encountered in "real life" are tentative judgements subject to continual testing and frequent refutation. We must

bring every bit of relevant evidence to bear. The more evidence we have, the better the judgement, and, when all is said and done, we can still be wrong.

The situation is no worse when seeing objects by means of movies or photographs. Often, indeed, we are better off when seeing events by means of movies or photographs, for filmmakers and photographers have techniques available to them for facilitating the process of identification. (Remember the slow-motion film being used by the scientist, as noted above.) The techniques are never foolproof and unscrupulous filmmakers and photographers may work hard to deceive us by mimicking them, but that is simply a part of the evidence that we must accumulate to play the identification game more accurately.

Propaganda movies, for example, and most feature films that for shared reasons employ propagandistic cutting techniques consist generally of sequences of short takes. Why? For the same reason that short glimpses are untrustworthy in everyday life, as noted above. Filmmakers can choose, however, to lengthening their takes, providing viewers with more information within which to measure the identity and credibility of the events seen, paralleling exactly the epistemological situation noted above in everyday life.

An object seen for only five second by means of a movie may easily be misidentified.

An object seen for thirty seconds may be misidentified but less easily.

An object seen for five minutes within a reasonably transparent context will seldom be misidentified, (given a reasonably transparent context).

And, as I write a century after the first movie appeared, even God would find it difficult to fake a thirty minute take (but God, of course, contrary to the presumption of a good many directors, has always preferred to create rather than direct!).

As every 'cinema direct' or 'cinema vérité' filmmaker has known, therefore, long takes preclude cutting and hence reinforce a viewer's ability to identify accurately the objects and events seen by means of the film. Could the viewer still be misled? Yes, but only with greater difficulty, for by foregoing the technique most calculated to mislead (i.e., rapid cutting), the 'vérité' documentarists provide the viewer with yet another piece of evidence upon which to secure accurate identifications.

Arguments from Mistaken Identity, therefore, are enlightening. They fail, however, to preclude the possibility of seeing objects in the world by means of movies or photographs. Carefully considered, indeed, they reaffirm it.

Our young girl has brought to bear every piece of evidence she possesses when identifying the object seen by means of the photograph of her grandfather with her grandfather. Could she be wrong in her identification? Surely, but she has played the right game rightly, and none of the counterarguments need impress her. They are invalid one and all.

The Impotence of Counterarguments

Our young girl's argument has easily withstood the careless counters of critics. This would be small comfort, however, were she to remain fearful of counterarguments yet to be constructed. Need she worry? No, strangely enough, for her contention rests upon an identity claim, a conjecture having a unique epistemological status; for

Identity claims are irrefutable.

An identity claim may prove to be less *useful* than a counter claim and hence less worthy of maintenance, but it is immune logically from counterexamples. Let's see why.

Imagine, for a moment, that a pen lies on my desk ten centimetres from the upper left corner. The pen weighs five grams, is black with silver trim and would break if dropped. Imagine, as well, that a book rests on my desk thirty centimetres from the upper left corner. The book weighs five-hundred grams, has a red cover and could well survive a casual fall.

I now ask you a strange and peculiar question, so strange and peculiar, indeed, that I know of no comparable query in the entire history of philosophy; namely is the pen *identical* to the book?¹⁵

¹⁵ I assume here that by 'A is identical to B' we mean exactly what Leibniz would have meant, namely that were one to speak truly of A, one would thereby speak truly of B, and conversely. One ought not to confuse this interesting claim with the trivial one suggesting that we think of a compound object consisting of the pen and the book as parts. The claim being considered here is not that the pen and the book are parts of a compound object, but rather that they are one and the same object. Many philosophers, assuming the non-identity of two objects, have inquired into the necessary and sufficient conditions of their 'individuation', etc.. No one, to my knowledge, has ever queried the possible identity of objects presumed to be distinct.

I presume, of course, that you and I believe the pen and the book to be distinct, and have no reason whatsoever to believe otherwise. But what if someone were to claim otherwise? What counterevidence could we bring against the claim?

Suppose someone were to enter my room and, in the course of conversation, assert that the pen is identical to the book. (I have no idea what reasons she might have for believing the pen and the book to be identical, and hence shall not contest the issue here. Let's imagine that she has her reasons, and caution ourselves to remember that, prior to the advent of quantum theory, no one had any reason to believe that a nuclear particle could be in two places at once, either, though that is now a compelling explanation for most variants of the classical two-slit experiment.)

What evidence could I bring against her claim? If I were to say to her, "But the pen weighs five grams while the book weighs five-hundred grams", she would reply "True enough, it weighs both five grams and five-hundred grams." Were I to retort, "But surely an object cannot weigh both five grams and five-hundred grams!", she would simply point to the pen/book (whichever, or both, from my viewpoint) and say: "But there's a counterexample!"

Note my dilemma! Whenever I attempt to point out a difference between the pen and the book, she accepts the distinction but construes it *adverbially* rather than *adjectivally*, retaining the identity. Every time I propose an empirical test, she agrees to the test (for example, the pen/book weighs five grams and five-hundred grams but apparently not three-hundred-and-fifty), but then simply attributes the bifurcation to a difference in measuring technique rather than to a difference in substance. (In one case we are measuring the object "in a pen-like way", in the other "in a book-like way"; the former yields five grams, the latter five-hundred)

Put another way, whenever I suggest that some unnegated predicate (whether relational or otherwise) is testably true of either the pen or the book, she agrees with me. Whenever I go on to suggest, however, that the predicate entails the *negation* of some other predicate, she refuses to accept the entailment, pointing out that I am thereby simply and obviously begging the question of the identity of the pen and the book.¹⁶ I can bring no counterevidence against her identity claim without – *from her perspective* – begging the question!

¹⁶ The difference between her holding to the identity, come what may, and holding to the truth of a testable assertion, come what may, is crucial. In the later instance she would have to deny some testable fact that I assert or presume some unknown fact to be testably true that I do not know to be true. But in this instance she denies no testable fact (indeed she agrees with

Clearly, I am trapped with no escape, and since the situation that we have been discussing is generalizable, the consequences are staggering. It is a scandalous, I suggest, that so few philosophers have heretofore registered the peculiar epistemological status of identity claims, a status that should have been evident since at least the time of Kant. Identity claims are immune to empirical refutation, for anyone, if logically careful, may take any A to be identical to any B without fear of empirical counterevidence, for no counterevidence can be brought to bear without begging the question.

The consequences for thinking in general, and for thinking about film and photography in particular, are fascinating and profound. Let me conclude this chapter with some remarks about the latter, before devoting Chapter 2 to the former.

Consequences for the Theory of Filmmaking

"Only Kodak tells it like it was."

Advertising slogan for the still-
photographic division of Eastman Kodak
Company, 1991.

Early in this essay I noted that commentators on film have been obsessed since the 19th-century with an ontological issue, namely, when one encounters an event by means of a movie or photograph, what *kind* of event does one encounter? A representation, an image, a picture, a depiction, a reproduction, a model, a signifier, an imaginary signifier, ...?

This entire critical tradition, I suggest, has been based upon a misunderstanding of the logic of identity claims. How one answers the above question makes no difference whatsoever to theorizing fruitfully about filmmaking. What is important is the answer one gives to a radically different question, namely,

When one encounters an event by means of movie or photography,
what is one *seeing*?

the result of every test I propose) and asserts no testable fact to be true that I deny. Her identity claim is therefore methodologically sound, unlike conventionalist claims.

The answer, given the flexibility that identity claims require, is 'that depends'! There can be no generally true yet nontrivial answer, for one must examine each cinematic or photographic event case by case, bring all the evidence at one's disposal to bear and then make a judgement based on the evidence.

When viewing 'cinema direct' movies, for example, one is quite likely to judge accurately that one is seeing an event identifiable with an event that occurred elsewhere in the world on a previous occasion. To deny this claim would, in most instances, render unintelligible the decisions made by the filmmakers in its presentation and permit no explanation of the persistence of the techniques unique to their documentary domain. We now live in a world, unlike the world of my great-grandparents, within which it is possible to enter a room in Toronto, thread-up a projector or turn on a digital replay unit and encounter thereby an event that occurred in a high school in Philadelphia in the late 1960s. Within a room in Toronto we may now by use of suitable machines witness an event that we can identify – and indeed *ought* to identify – with an event that a 'cinema verité' filmmaker encountered in the late 1960s in Philadelphia.

In the case of narrative movies, on the other hand, the issue is complex - much more so, indeed, than the issue of how we identify events in the everyday world. Unless great care is taken, thinkers will misrepresent both the richness and the complexity of a viewer's responses to them.

Imagine, for example, that I were to project for myself a print of HIGH NOON. What would I see? Would I see Sheriff Kane walking down the main street of a western town looking for help? or would I see Gary Cooper walking down a street on a backlot in Hollywood?

The answer to both questions is 'Yes', and one will misconstrue the scope and limits of film theory unless one remains open to the evidence in favour of them all.

But the bottom logical line is transparent:

One encounters events by means of movies and photographs, and sometimes those events enable one to see events that can justifiably be identified with events otherwise encounterable in the world.

The conventionality of identity, pragmatically construed, reorders the tasks of film theorists, aligning them with theoretical inquiries in other disciplines. The living questions now become:

What *have* movies enabled us to see?

What *can* movies enable us to see? and (perhaps most difficult of all)

What *ought* movies to enable us to see?

These are admittedly tough questions, but they are at least empirically approachable, unlike the pervasive and fruitless ontological queries of the past one-hundred years that appear nowhere on the list.