

1ES 1927+654: an AGN Caught Changing Look on a Timescale of Months

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ABSTRACT

We study the sudden optical and UV brightening of 1ES 1927+654, which until now was known as a narrow-line active galactic nucleus (AGN). 1ES 1927+654 was part of the small and peculiar class of “true Type-2” AGN, which lack broad emission lines and line-of-sight obscuration. Our high-cadence spectroscopic monitoring captures the appearance of a blue, featureless continuum, followed several weeks later by the appearance of broad Balmer emission lines. This timescale is broadly consistent with the expected light travel time between the central engine and the broad line emission region in (persistent) broad-line AGN. *HST* spectroscopy reveals no evidence for broad UV emission lines (e.g., C IV λ 1549, C III] λ 1909, Mg II λ 2798), probably due to dust in the broad line emission region. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first case where the lag between the change in continuum and in broad line emission of a “changing-look” AGN has been temporally resolved. The nature and timescales of the photometric and spectral evolution disfavor both a change in line-of-sight obscuration and a change of the overall rate of gas inflow as driving the drastic spectral changes seen in this AGN. Although the peak luminosity and timescales are consistent with those of tidal disruption events seen in

inactive galaxies, but the spectral properties are not. The X-ray emission displays a markedly different behavior, with frequent flares on timescales of hours to days, and will be presented in a companion publication.

Keywords: galaxies: active — galaxies: nuclei — quasars: general — quasars: emission lines — galaxies: individual: 1ES 1927+654

1. INTRODUCTION

Large-scale time-domain surveys have allowed the recent identification of new types of extreme variability among both dormant and active supermassive black holes (SMBHs). Among these, so-called “changing look active galactic nuclei” (CL-AGN hereafter) are characterized by a switch between spectral states that are dominated by an AGN-like, power-law optical/ultraviolet (UV) continuum and/or strong broad emission lines ($>1000 \text{ km s}^{-1}$; i.e., Type-1 AGN), and those dominated by stellar continuum emission (from the host galaxy), and only narrow forbidden transitions from high-ionization species (i.e., Type-2 AGN). Many recent studies have identified a growing numbers of such cases (e.g., Denney et al. 2014; Shappee et al. 2014; LaMassa et al. 2015; MacLeod et al. 2016; McElroy et al. 2016; Runnoe et al. 2016; Ross et al. 2018; Stern et al. 2018; Yang et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2018, and references therein), as well as cases of drastic changes to line-of-sight obscuration, identified in the X-rays (e.g., Matt et al. 2003; Piconcelli et al. 2007; Ricci et al. 2016).

The drastic changes seen in CL-AGN challenge the simplest form of the AGN unification framework (e.g., Urry & Padovani 1995), where the two main spectral types are explained by orientation, and where Type-2 AGN are the dust-obscured counterparts to broad-line, Type-1 AGN. A transient event in which a dusty cloud is going into (or out of) the line of sight is a rather unlikely explanation for CL-AGN, as the cloud would have to cover a significant fraction of the broad line emission region (i.e., BLR), with sizes $\gg 10^{16} \text{ cm}$, to account for the Type-2 appearance. More likely explanations are that CL-AGN are driven by dramatic changes to the accretion rate onto the SMBH, or indeed the reformation or truncation of a radiatively-efficient accretion flow; and/or by a sudden change to the amount of dense circumnuclear gas, that would give rise to broad emission lines (that is, BLR gas). The timescales relevant for the CL-AGN reported up until now, of order several years, are far shorter than what is expected for global accretion rate changes in optically thick, geometrically thin accretion disks (see, e.g., Lawrence 2018; Stern et al. 2018). However, the sparse spectroscopic sampling of these CL-AGN – with “before” and “after”

spectra usually taken years apart – has so far prohibited a direct and clear-cut test of these scenarios.

1ES 1927+654 is a known $z = 0.019422$ AGN, based on its X-ray emission, identified with the *Einstein* and *ROSAT* satellites. The strong narrow, forbidden lines of high-ionization species ([O III] $\lambda 5007$, [N II] $\lambda 6584$), observed in optical spectra taken in 2001 June, further classify 1ES 1927+654 as a Type-2 AGN (e.g., Boller et al. 2003; Tran et al. 2011). Several studies of 1ES 1927+654 have suggested that it challenges the AGN unification framework, by pointing out the very small amount of obscuring material along the line of sight (i.e., a hydrogen column density of $\log [N_{\text{H}}/\text{cm}^{-2}] \lesssim 21.1$; see Gallo et al. 2013) and the lack of broad lines emitting in polarized light (Tran et al. 2011). Thus, 1ES 1927+654 was proposed to be a prime example for the rare class of “true” or “naked” Type-2 AGN, intrinsically lacking the denser gas that gives rise to the BLR, and/or the photoionizing continuum radiation that drives the broad line emission.

Here we report a dramatic optical and UV brightening of 1ES 1927+654, accompanied by the appearance of prominent broad emission lines with a time delay consistent with the expected size of a BLR.

2. OBSERVATIONS

2.1. Photometry

An increase in optical flux from 1ES 1927+654 was discovered on 2018 March 3 (UT used throughout; Nicholls et al. 2018; Stanek 2018) and announced by the All-Sky Automated Survey for Supernovae (ASAS-SN; Shappee et al. 2014), with a reported V -band host-subtracted magnitude of 15.3. The transient event was reported as ASASSN-18el and given the name AT2018zf by the transient name server¹. Pre-discovery detections from 2017 December 23 were recovered by the Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System (ATLAS; Tonry et al. 2018) and designated as ATLAS18mgv. In what follows, we adopt this earlier ATLAS pre-discovery measurement as the detection date.

ASAS-SN images were processed by the fully automatic ASAS-SN pipeline (Shappee et al. 2014) using the

¹ <http://wis-tns.weizmann.ac.il/object/2018zf>

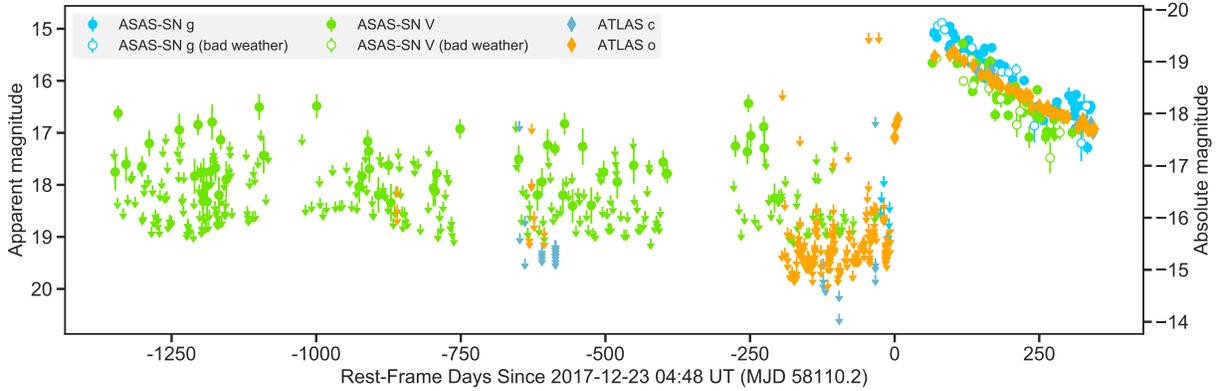


Figure 1. Long-term optical light curve of 1ES 1927+654 showing no activity at the level of the most recent flare (2017 December 23) in the last ~ 4 years. Arrows denote 3σ non-detection upper limits. All detections are binned nightly, and we separate ASAS-SN detections where clouds are seen in visual inspection of the images (marked by empty symbols). Error bars denote 1σ uncertainties and are sometimes smaller than the symbols. All magnitudes are corrected for Milky Way extinction.

ISIS image subtraction package (Alard & Lupton 1998; Alard 2000). We performed aperture photometry on the subtracted, stacked images in order to increase the S/N of the detections, and calibrated the results using the AAVSO Photometric All-sky Survey (APASS; Henden et al. 2016).

Forced photometry was run on all reference-subtracted ATLAS images to produce magnitudes and 3σ upper limits, using automated point-spread-function fitting, as documented in Tonry et al. (2018; all ATLAS magnitudes are in the AB system). In a large number of images, there were flux artifacts at the transient position, due to the bright host and imperfect subtraction. These clearly spurious measurements were excised from the ATLAS light-curve.

All optical magnitudes, as well as UV magnitudes and optical spectra (see below), were corrected for Milky Way extinction using $E(B - V) = 0.077$ (Schlafly & Finkbeiner 2011)², the Cardelli et al. (1989) extinction law, and $R_V = 3.1$.

Following the sudden optical flux increase, we initiated a near-UV (NUV) and X-ray monitoring campaign using the Neil Gehrels *Swift* Observatory (PI: I. Arcavi). UVOT photometry was extracted with standard HEASARC functions using a $5''$ -radius aperture for the object and for the sky region. The host flux in the NUV *UVW1* and *UVM2* bands was determined from *XMM-Newton*/OM data obtained in 2011 May 20 (Gallo et al. 2013, AB magnitudes of 18.14 and 18.65, respectively, using the same aperture), and subtracted from our new UVOT measurements. The X-ray analysis is discussed

in detail in a companion paper (Ricci et al., in prep.). The final light curves are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

2.2. Spectroscopy

We obtained optical spectra of 1ES 1927+654 with the OSMOS spectrograph mounted on the Hiltner 2.4m Telescope at the MDM observatory (Martini et al. 2011); the SPRAT spectrograph mounted on the 2m Liverpool Telescope at the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory (Pascik et al. 2014); the Kast spectrograph mounted on the 3m Shane Telescope at the Lick Observatory (Miller & Stone 1993); the FLOYDS spectrograph mounted on the 2m Faulkes Telescope North at Haleakala, Hawaii (part of the Las Cumbres Observatory network; Brown et al. 2013); the Dual Imaging Spectrograph mounted on the Apache Point Observatory 3.5m telescope; the Low Resolution Imaging Spectrograph (LRIS) mounted on the Keck-I telescope at Mauna Kea (Oke et al. 1995); and the Double Beam Spectrograph (DBSP) mounted on the Palomar Hale 200-inch telescope (Oke & Gunn 1982). All optical spectra were reduced following standard procedures, and scaled to match the ATLAS *orange*-band measurements, linearly interpolating between the nearest relevant ATLAS visits. The sequence of optical spectra is shown in Figure 3.

We obtained far-UV (FUV) and NUV spectra of 1ES 1927+654 using the COS and STIS instruments, respectively, on board the *Hubble Space Telescope* (*HST*; Program ID 15604, PI: C.L. MacLeod). Each spectrum was obtained through single-orbit exposures of 2866 and 2740 s, respectively, on August 28, and reduced following standard *HST* procedures. The two flux-calibrated *HST* spectra are shown in Figure 4.

A log of all our spectral observations of 1ES 1927+654 is detailed in Table 1 and all our spectra are available

² retrieved via the NASA/IPAC Extragalactic Database (NED): <http://ned.ipac.caltech.edu/>

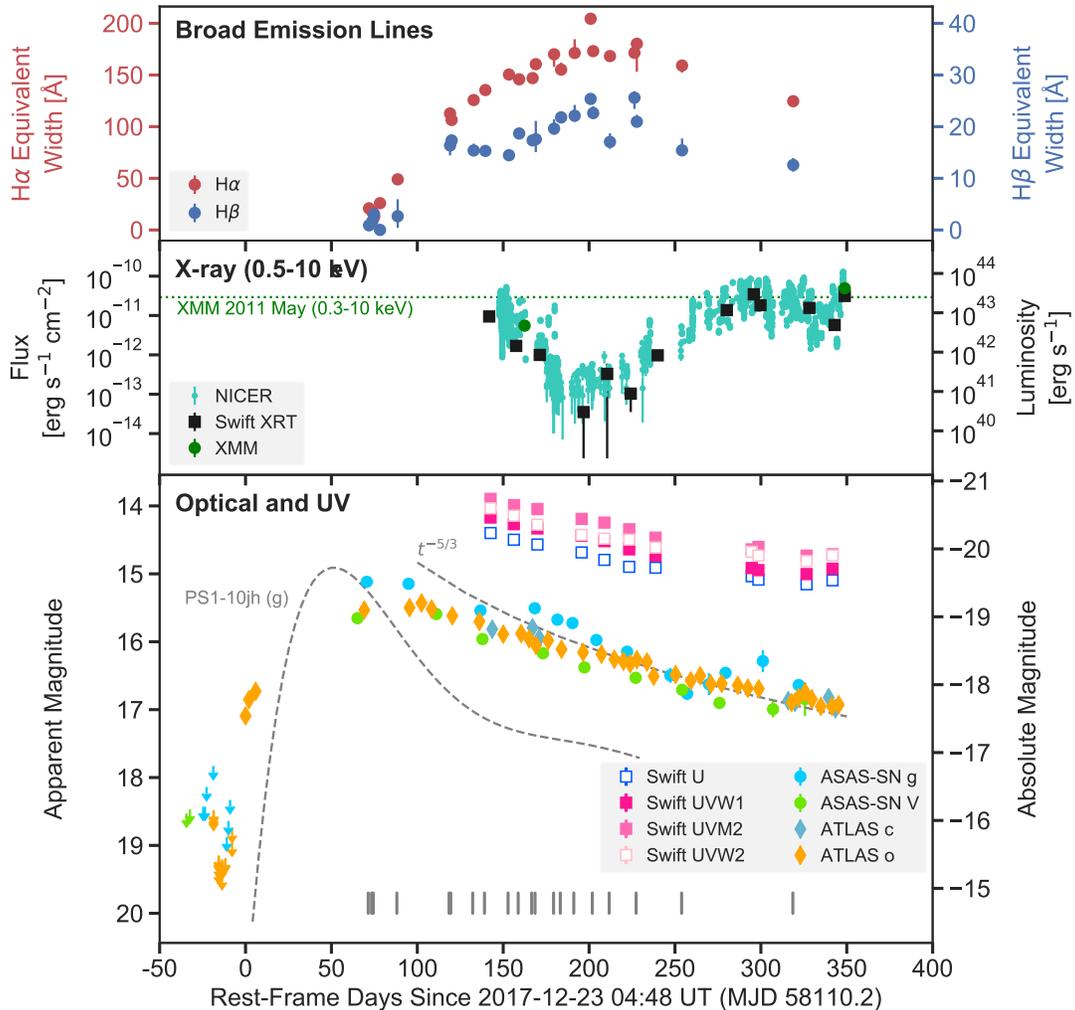


Figure 2. Light curve and equivalent-width evolution of 1ES 1927+654 during the flare. *Bottom:* Optical and UV light-curves, obtained with ATLAS, ASAS-SN, and *Swift*/UVOT. Arrows denote 3σ non-detection upper limits. Empty symbols denote non-host-subtracted data. The ATLAS data are binned nightly up to peak, and then binned every two nights. The ASAS-SN data are binned weekly. Error bars denote 1σ uncertainties. Vertical lines near the bottom of the panel denote epochs of optical spectra. The dashed gray lines trace a simple $\propto t^{-5/3}$ power-law and the g -band light curve of the TDE PS1-10jh (matched in absolute magnitude; Gezari et al. 2012). *Middle:* X-ray light-curve obtained with *Swift*/XRT, *NICER*, and *XMM-Newton*. The spread in *NICER* measurements is real, tracing dramatic and fast variability (order of magnitude changes seen day-to-day). The horizontal dotted line marks the 2011 May archival flux level in the *XMM-Newton* 0.3-10 keV band (Gallo et al. 2013). *Top:* equivalent-width evolution of the broad components of the $H\beta$ and $H\alpha$ emission lines.

for download from the Weizmann Interactive Supernova Data Repository (WISerEP)³.

We also obtained optical spectra of the four nearest (projected) neighbouring sources of 1ES 1927+654 (sources within $\sim 3-12''$, numbered 2, 3, 5 and 6 in Fig. 9 of Boller et al. 2003), using the FLOYDS spectrograph on the Las Cumbres Observatory 2m Faulkes Telescope North. We find that all sources are Milky Way stars,

which are not expected to contribute to the significant activity detected towards 1ES 1927+654.⁴

3. ANALYSIS

The NUV emission from 1ES 1927+654, as measured from our first *Swift* observations, has increased by a factor of about 40 compared with the 2011 May *XMM-Newton* measurement (Gallo et al. 2013). The

³ <http://wiserep.weizmann.ac.il/>

⁴ Indeed, none of these stars are detected in the *Chandra* data of Boller et al. (2003).

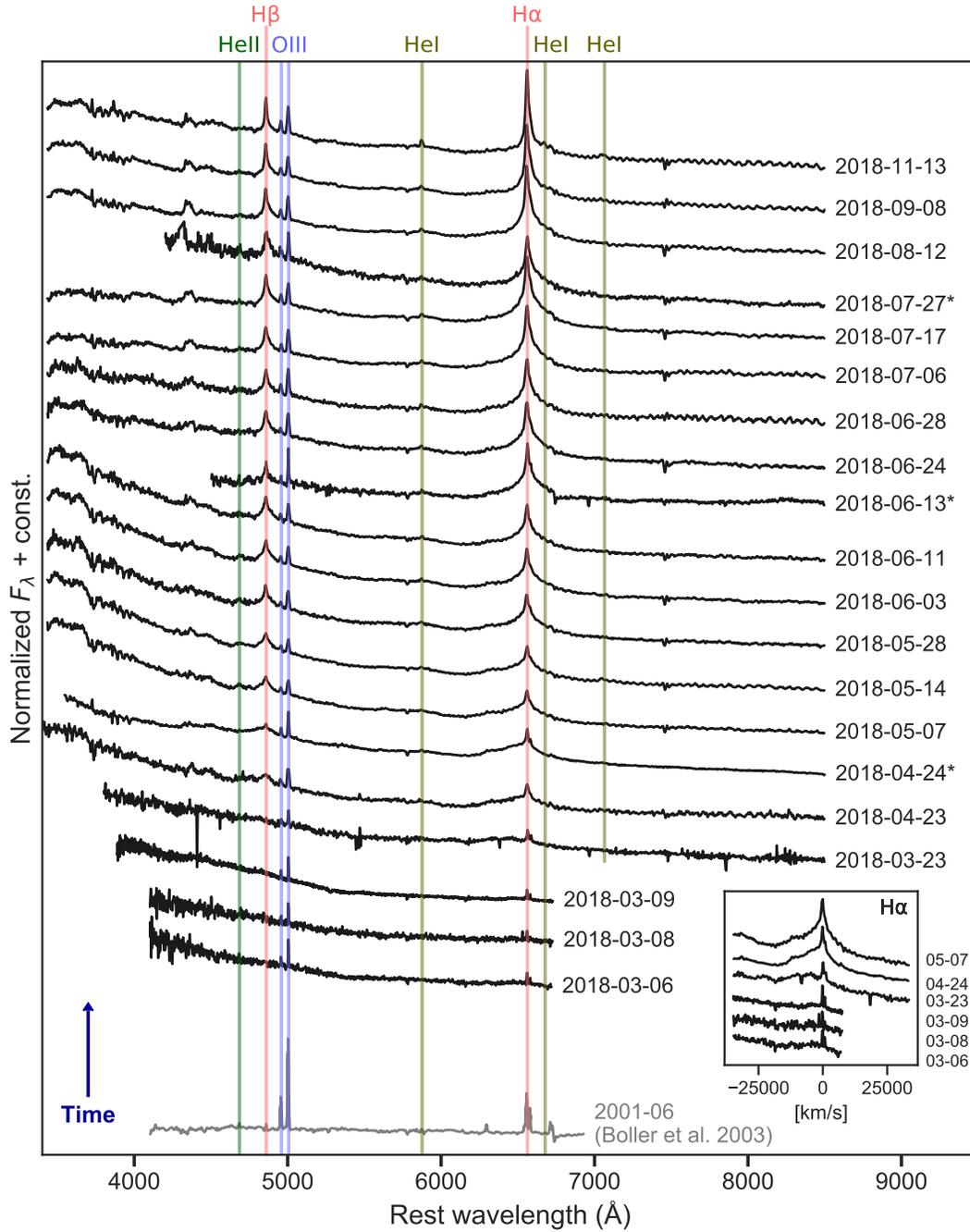


Figure 3. Optical spectra of 1ES 1927+654 showing the transition from a narrow-line (Type-2) AGN (bottom; from [Boller et al. 2003](#)) to a broad-line (Type-1) AGN with an intermediate stage of a blue-continuum dominated emission. The appearance of the broad lines is constrained to a timescale of several weeks (between the 2018 March 6 and April 23 spectra), although there is some evidence for weak, broad, and blue-shifted H α line in our first spectra, as shown in the inset. All spectra are plotted without Milky way extinction corrections. Dates marked with * indicate spectra taken under different weather and/or instrument conditions compared to a standard star, thus affecting the validity of their continuum shape.

Table 1. Log of spectroscopic observations

Date ^a	MJD start	Δt_{rf} ^b	Telescope	Inst.	Exp.
	time ^a (d)	(d)			time (s)
2018-03-06	58183.5	72	MDM Hiltner 2.4m	OSMOS	600
2018-03-08	58185.5	74	MDM Hiltner 2.4m	OSMOS	1800
2018-03-09	58186.5	75	MDM Hiltner 2.4m	OSMOS	2700
2018-03-13 ^c	58190.0	79	Liverpool Telescope 2m	SPRAT	600
2018-03-23*	58200.5	89	APO 3.5m	DIS	300
2018-04-23	58231.6	119	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	1800
2018-04-24	58232.5	120	Shane 3m	Kast	$\sim 1500^\dagger$
2018-05-07	58245.6	133	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	1800
2018-05-14	58252.5	140	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	1800
2018-05-28	58266.5	153	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	1800
2018-06-03	58272.6	159	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	1800
2018-06-11	58280.6	167	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	1800
2018-06-13*	58282.5	169	APO 3.5m	DIS	600
2018-06-24	58293.3	180	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	1800
2018-06-28	58297.5	184	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	3600
2018-07-06	58305.5	192	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	3600
2018-07-16	58315.5	201	Keck	LRIS	900
2018-07-17	58316.5	202	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	3600
2018-07-27	58326.5	212	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	3600
2018-08-11	58341.0	227	Hale-200 inch	DBSP	1200
2018-08-12	58342.4	228	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	3600
2018-09-08	58369.3	254	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	3600
2018-11-13	58435.2	319	Las Cumbres 2m	FLOYDS	3600
2018-08-28	58358.4	244	<i>HST</i>	COS	2866
2018-08-28	58358.5	244	<i>HST</i>	STIS	2740

^aAt exposure start, UT. Dates marked with * indicate spectra taken under different weather and/or instrument conditions compared to a standard star, thus affecting the validity of their continuum shape.

^bTime since ATLAS first detection of the optical flare, in rounded rest-frame days.

^cA low resolution spectrum, not shown in [Figure 3](#).

[†]The Shane/Kast exposure times were 3x500 seconds for the red arm, and 1x1560 for the blue.

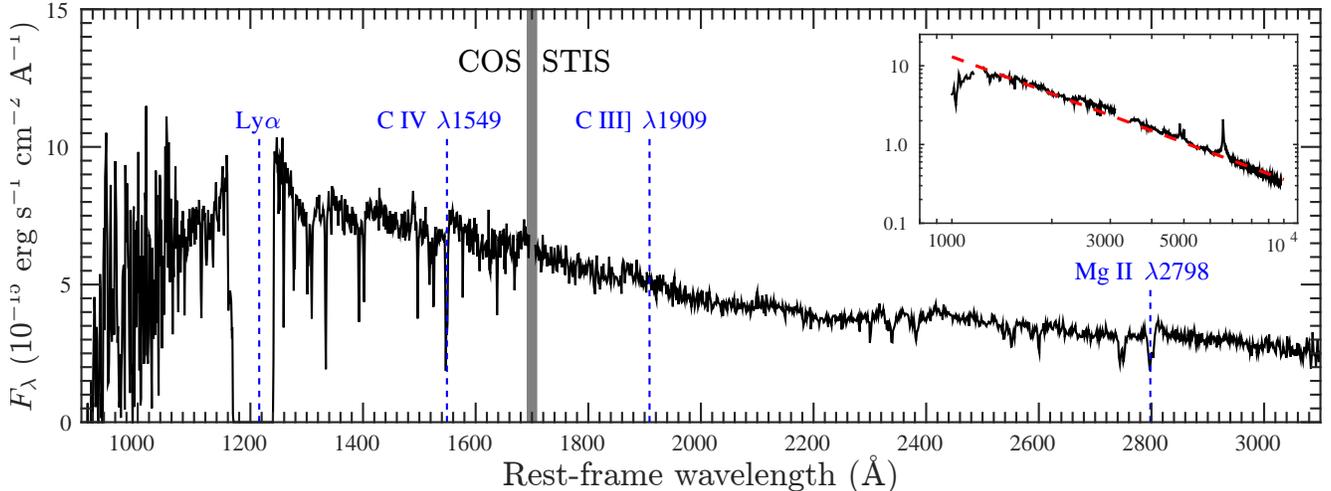


Figure 4. A combined *HST* UV spectrum of 1ES 1927+654, obtained on 2018 August 28 with the COS (shortward of rest-frame wavelength of $\lambda_{\text{rest}} = 1700 \text{ \AA}$) and STIS (longward of 1700 \AA) instruments. The vertical lines mark the expected locations of the C IV $\lambda 1549$, C III] $\lambda 1909$, and Mg II $\lambda 2798$ transitions, commonly seen as prominent broad ($> 1000 \text{ km s}^{-1}$) emission lines in broad-line AGN. The absence of such broad lines is consistent with the presence of dust in the broad-line region. The inset compares the UV-optical SED, which includes the *HST* spectra and the 2018 Sept. 8 Las Cumbres spectrum (all median-binned to 7 \AA), with a typical quasar power-law SED of the form $f_{\nu} \propto \nu^{-0.44}$ (Vanden Berk et al. 2001). This agreement indicates a mostly dust-free line-of-sight towards the continuum source.

XRT data (Figure 2), together with new data we obtained with *XMM-Newton* and the *Neutron star Interior Composition Explorer* (*NICER*; Gendreau et al. 2012), show more complex behaviour compared to the optical and UV light curve, including significant variability on timescales of hours seen in the *NICER* rapid monitoring. These X-ray data are analyzed in detail in a companion paper (Ricci et al., in prep.).

The first post-flare optical spectra are dominated by blue continuum emission, as well as several narrow emission lines, including $H\beta$, [O III] $\lambda 5007$, $H\alpha$, and [N II] $\lambda 6584$. There is evidence for a weak, broad, and blue-shifted $H\alpha$ emission feature in these first post-flare spectra (see inset of Figure 3), however the limited spectral coverage does not allow for a robust measurement. The narrow line emission is consistent with gas photoionized by an AGN-like continuum, according to emission line ratio diagnostics (i.e., “BPT diagnostics”; see, e.g., Kewley et al. 2006, and references therein), and is therefore consistent with previous studies of 1ES 1927+654. However, the blue continuum was not present in archival data (Boller et al. 2003; Tran et al. 2011).

Strong, broad $H\alpha$ and $H\beta$ lines appeared on top of the blue continuum between 2018 March 6 and April 23 (Figure 3). These lines remain strong during our entire spectroscopic monitoring campaign, lasting at least 11 months after the optical flare detection (see top panel of Figure 2). To our knowledge this is the first time an AGN has been caught in the act of changing its type,

with a blue continuum seen to appear before the broad lines, and the timescale for the broad line appearance constrained to within about a month (i.e., between the 2018 March 23 and April 23 spectra).

The FUV (*HST*/COS) spectrum shows evidence for broad $\text{Ly}\alpha$ line emission, although the core of the line is missing due to the physical gap in the COS detectors. Most notably, the *HST* spectra do not show the prominent broad C IV $\lambda 1549$, C III] $\lambda 1909$, and Mg II $\lambda 2798$ emission lines, commonly seen in the spectra of “normal”, persistent broad-line AGN (quasars). The combined UV (*HST*, 2018 Aug. 28) and optical (Las Cumbres, 2018 Sept. 8) post-flare spectrum of 1ES 1927+654 is in excellent agreement with the typical spectral shape of such broad-line AGN (i.e., $f_{\nu} \sim \nu^{-0.5}$, Vanden Berk et al. 2001; see inset of Figure 4), justifying some of the spectral analysis steps detailed below.

To measure the spectral features observed in our optical data, we decomposed the spectral regions surrounding the $H\beta$, Mg II and C IV lines, following the procedures presented in Trakhtenbrot & Netzer (2012). The region surrounding the $H\alpha$ line was decomposed using a procedure that follows the one presented in Mejía-Restrepo et al. (2016). The spectral models include a local (linear) continuum, a broadened iron emission template, single Gaussians for the narrow features of the $H\beta$, [O III], $H\alpha$, and [N II] lines, and two broad Gaussians for each of the broad emission lines. Uncertainties on key quantities were derived through a re-sampling procedure, fitting 100 realizations of each of the ob-

served spectra assuming the observed noise, and eventually adopting the 16th and 84th quantiles as 1σ equivalent errors on the quantities in question.

The top panel of Figure 2 shows the time evolution of the rest-frame equivalent widths (EW) of the broad $H\beta$ and $H\alpha$ lines. There is a clear rise in the broad $EW(H\alpha)$ between 2018 March 9 and 23 (i.e., about 70–90 days after the optical transient detection), completing an order-of-magnitude increase to $EW(H\alpha) \simeq 110 \text{ \AA}$ by April 23 (120 days after detection, in rest-frame). By this time the broad $H\beta$ line can be robustly identified, with $EW(H\beta) = 16 \pm 2 \text{ \AA}$. Upon first robust appearance of a broad $H\alpha$ line (in the March 23 spectrum), it is highly blue-shifted, with $\Delta v \simeq -5000 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ compared to the systemic redshift (and to the narrow $H\alpha$ component), and broad, with full-width at half maximum of $FWHM(H\alpha) \simeq 18000 \text{ km s}^{-1}$. At later times the line emission remains roughly constant, with EWs in the range $EW(H\beta) \sim 15\text{--}27 \text{ \AA}$ and $EW(H\alpha) \sim 125\text{--}180 \text{ \AA}$. The $H\alpha$ strength in 1ES 1927+654 is rather typical of low-redshift broad-line AGN, with roughly half of such systems having $EW(H\alpha) \lesssim 200 \text{ \AA}$ (see, e.g., the luminous AGN samples studied by Shen et al. 2011 and Koss et al. 2017, and also Stern & Laor 2012a and Oh et al. 2015 for less luminous systems). The $H\beta$ emission in 1ES 1927+654, on the other hand, is rather weak, compared with the $\sim 95\%$ of vigorously accreting broad-line, low-redshift AGN that have $EW(H\beta) > 25 \text{ \AA}$ (see also Trakhtenbrot & Netzer 2012).

Throughout our spectroscopic monitoring, the broad $H\alpha$ to $H\beta$ flux ratio, which probes the Balmer decrement, was high, with $F(bH\alpha)/F(bH\beta) \gtrsim 8$, and has further increased up to ~ 20 , as the broad $H\beta$ line flux has decreased. These line ratios are much higher than what is typically seen in broad-line AGN (e.g., Dong et al. 2008), and are indicative of a highly dusty broad line emission region. This can also account for the non detection of UV line emission: our *HST* spectra resulted in upper limits of $EW(C\text{IV}) < 1 \text{ \AA}$ and $EW(\text{Mg II}) < 5 \text{ \AA}$, which are indeed much lower than what is usually found for broad-line AGN (e.g., Baskin & Laor 2005; Sulentic et al. 2007; Richards et al. 2011; Shen et al. 2011; Tang et al. 2012). The steep Balmer decrement suggests extinction levels of at least $A_{\text{line}} \approx 6.5$ and 4.8 mag at the central wavelengths of the C IV and Mg II lines, respectively.⁵ If one would scale up our UV line EW upper limits based on these significant levels of extinction, then our data could be consistent with the distribution of broad UV emission line strength, as seen in normal

broad-line AGN. Recalling that the *continuum* emission does not show any evidence for significant dust extinction (inset of Figure 4; but see also Baron et al. 2016), we conclude that a high dust content *within* the broad line emission region is consistent with all the UV-optical data in hand.

To derive rough estimates of the size of the newly detected broad emission line region, R_{BLR} , we rely on $R_{\text{BLR}} - L$ relations derived from reverberation mapping campaigns. As the broad line emission is essentially driven by the ionizing (UV) radiation from the central engine, we can use the highest *Swift*-measured NUV monochromatic luminosity⁶ of $\lambda L_{\lambda}(\text{NUV}) \simeq 1.2 \times 10^{44} \text{ erg s}^{-1}$ (in the *UVM2* band, $\lambda_{\text{eff}} = 2262 \text{ \AA}$), and the $R_{\text{BLR}} - L_{1450}$ relation of Kaspi et al. (2005), to derive a BLR size of $R_{\text{BLR}}(\text{UV}) \simeq 30$ light-days. This estimate is likely a lower limit, as our earliest *Swift* observation took place after the optical peak (see Figure 2), and since the SED of the source is likely to further rise from the observed NUV band towards, and indeed beyond, the Lyman limit (see Shull et al. 2012, and references therein).

Using instead the optical monochromatic luminosity at rest-frame 5100 \AA , $\lambda L_{\lambda}(5100 \text{ \AA})$ (hereafter L_{5100}), measured from the first spectrum that robustly shows both broad Balmer emission lines (the 2018 April 23 spectrum), which is $L_{5100} = 9.6 \times 10^{42} \text{ erg s}^{-1}$, and the $R_{\text{BLR}} - L_{5100}$ prescription of Bentz et al. (2013), we derive $R_{\text{BLR}} \simeq 10$ light-days.

The BLR sizes we obtain through $R_{\text{BLR}} - L$ relations, on the order of tens of light days, are consistent with the delay of 1–3 months between the UV/optical flux increase and the appearance of the broad lines, to within the uncertainties related with the $R_{\text{BLR}} - L$ relations, which are mostly due to systematics. Indeed, the source-to-source scatter around the $R_{\text{BLR}} - L$ relations is of order 0.2 dex (e.g., Bentz et al. 2013).

We further use the Keck/LRIS spectrum taken on 2018 July 16 to estimate key properties of the accreting SMBH powering 1ES 1927+654. This higher resolution spectrum probes the broad Balmer lines about 12 weeks after their appearance. The best-fit spectral model results in a broad $H\beta$ line width of $FWHM(H\beta) = 3100_{-80}^{+70} \text{ km s}^{-1}$. The (narrow) [O III] $\lambda 5007$ line peak indicates a redshift of $z = 0.01942$, which we adopt throughout. Combining the aforementioned L_{5100} -based BLR size estimate of 10 light days with the broad $H\beta$ width, and a virial factor $f=1$, we obtain a virial (“single-epoch”) BH mass estimate of

⁵ Assuming again the Cardelli et al. 1989 extinction law and $R_V = 3.1$.

⁶ We assume a cosmological model with $\Omega_{\Lambda} = 0.7$, $\Omega_M = 0.3$, and $H_0 = 70 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$.

$M_{\text{BH}} \simeq 1.9 \times 10^7 M_{\odot}$. The uncertainties on such mass estimates are of order 0.3–0.5 dex – dominated by systematic uncertainties on the $R_{\text{BLR}} - L_{5100}$ relation and on the virial factor f (see Shen 2013 for a detailed discussion). Our M_{BH} estimate is in excellent agreement with the one reported by Tran et al. (2011; $2.2 \times 10^7 M_{\odot}$), which was based on far less robust methods (i.e., the narrow [O III] $\lambda 5007$ line). Finally, by combining the M_{BH} estimate with a bolometric correction of $f_{\text{bol}}(5100) = 9$, we derive an Eddington ratio of $L/L_{\text{Edd}} \equiv f_{\text{bol}}(5100) \times L_{5100} / (1.5 \times 10^{38} \times [M_{\text{BH}}/M_{\odot}]) \simeq 0.03$. Adopting the same M_{BH} estimate and bolometric correction to all our spectroscopic data (i.e., L_{5100} measurements), we obtain Eddington ratios in the range $L/L_{\text{Edd}} \approx 0.008 - 0.03$. If we instead use the highest measured NUV luminosity and a conservative NUV bolometric correction of $f_{\text{bol}}(\text{NUV}) = 2$ (or 4; see, e.g., Trakhtenbrot & Netzer 2012; Runnoe et al. 2012; Netzer et al. 2016), we obtain Eddington ratios of order $L/L_{\text{Edd}} \approx 0.1$ (or 0.2, respectively). All these estimates of L/L_{Edd} are highly uncertain, as the (optical to X-ray) SED shape of 1ES 1927+654 during this intensified UV/optical emission episode, and thus the bolometric luminosity and corrections, are likely very different from what is normally seen and/or assumed for broad-line AGN. A detailed analysis of the full SED of 1ES 1927+654 will be presented in the companion paper (Ricci et al., in prep.).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our data show that 1ES 1927+654 experienced a dramatic increase in continuum UV/optical emission, forming a blue, AGN-like continuum, which was then followed by the appearance of prominent broad Balmer emission lines. While both the (optical) continuum and line emission rose within about a month, the appearance of the broad Balmer lines lagged the continuum rise by 1-3 months. The uncertainty in the time lag determination is due to the uncertainty in the exact time the UV flux peaked, and the exact time the broad lines emerged. Still, to our knowledge, this is the first observation of a changing look AGN (CL-AGN) where the lag between the change in continuum and in broad line emission has been temporally resolved. Broad UV lines, some of which probe higher levels of ionization (e.g., C IV $\lambda 1549$), remain undetected.

The delay between the continuum and broad line emission, if taken as the light travel time to the BLR, allows us to estimate a BLR radius (R_{BLR}) of roughly 1-3 light-months. Moreover, our spectroscopic time series (Figure 3) shows that the highest-velocity BLR gas

was observed to respond first, followed later by a steady increase in the lower-velocity, core line emission.

These dramatic changes seen in 1ES 1927+654 are unlikely to be driven by a change in the level of line-of-sight obscuration (i.e., a dusty cloud moving out of the line-of-sight), as in such a case one would expect no delay between the appearance of the two emission components. Indeed, our rich collection of X-ray data (Ricci et al., in prep.) offers no evidence for a coherent and persistent X-ray spectral change that could straightforwardly be linked to a change in line-of-sight obscuration. We also recall that 1ES 1927+654 was identified as one of the few “true type-2” AGN⁷ – systems which show neither broad line emission nor significant line-of-sight obscuration (which might have accounted for the lack of broad lines). Such systems are thought to have either a low content of broad-line emitting circumnuclear gas (i.e., no BLR gas) and/or insufficient levels of ionizing continuum emission.

All this suggests that the changes seen in 1ES 1927+654 are most likely driven by a sudden change in the accretion flow onto the SMBH, resulting in increased UV/optical continuum emission which traveled to the BLR gas, where it was re-processed and gave rise to broad line emission.

Here we briefly consider three possibilities for the nearly-cotemporal appearance of the blue continuum and broad line emission.

First, a fresh supply of (cold) gas may have reached the close vicinity of the SMBH. Some of the gas may have ended up being accreted onto the SMBH, thus illuminating circumnuclear gas on larger scales, some of which has properties consistent with that of the BLR seen in “normal” broad-line AGN. However, the X-ray and *narrow* line emission previously seen in 1ES 1927+654 indicates that the SMBH has been vigorously accreting for over a decade (and perhaps through $\sim 10^{3-4}$ years). Moreover, the month-long rise of the continuum and line emission is far faster than what is expected from a global rise in the accretion rate through an AGN-like disk, and/or from heating/cooling fronts traveling within a such a disk 1ES 1927+654 (see discussion in, e.g., LaMassa et al. 2015; Lawrence 2018; Ross et al. 2018; Stern et al. 2018).

Second, a drastic change in the accretion flow and in the related UV/optical continuum emission may have initiated broad line emission in a pre-existing reservoir of BLR-like gas (see the discussion in Stern & Laor 2012b, and references therein). One intriguing possi-

⁷ It most obviously no longer fits into this class.

bility is that a UV “flash” sublimated the dust in the inner regions of a dusty obscuring structure (i.e., a dusty “torus”), making this inner-torus region appear as a de-facto newly-formed BLR (see the review by Netzer 2015, and references therein). Given the previous “true type-2” classification of 1ES 1927+654, it is possible that the system is observed at a relatively small inclination angle (i.e., relatively “face on”), and that the historically low UV emission allowed the torus to extend inwards. Indeed, the BLR gas may still have a significant dust content, which would account for the steep Balmer decrement and the non-detected broad UV emission lines. We recall again that the physical conditions and radiation transfer within the BLR gas in 1ES 1927+654 may not be necessarily similar to those in normal broad-line AGN.

Finally, several models suggest that increased SMBH accretion may trigger disk instabilities (Nicastrò et al. 2003) or indeed launch a disk-wind (e.g., Elitzur & Ho 2009; Elitzur & Netzer 2016), either of which would then be exposed to the incident ionizing radiation (from the inner disk) and thus be seen in broad line emission. Some recent studies suggest observational evidence for a link between CL-AGN and such disk-winds (e.g., Giustini et al. 2017; MacLeod et al. 2019). However, the relevance of this disk-wind scenario to the drastic changes seen in 1ES 1927+654 is unclear, given (1) the absence of high-ionization, UV broad emission lines (Figure 4), which are expected to form in the inner region of a disk-wind (e.g., Richards et al. 2011, and references therein); (2) the delay between the continuum and broad line emission appearance is much longer than what is expected for a disk-wind; and (3) the lack of clear evidence for outflows in our UV and optical spectroscopy. Moreover, the Nicastrò et al. (2003) scenario is rather unlikely, as it is expected to occur around a threshold Eddington rate of $L/L_{\text{Edd}} \approx 10^{-3}$ – which is lower than the *pre-flare* state of 1ES 1927+654 (see Elitzur & Netzer 2016).

The initial cause of the dramatic changes seen here remains to be determined. As noted above, the observed timescales are inconsistent with large-scale changes to an AGN-like accretion flow, or to line-of-sight obscuration. Instead, the optical rise time, the peak luminosity, and the following decline are reminiscent of tidal disruption events (TDEs), as illustrated by the comparison to the TDE PS1-10jh (Gezari et al. 2012) and to a generic $t^{-5/3}$ power-law shown in the bottom panel of Figure 2 (e.g., Rees 1988; Phinney 1989). Associating the changes in 1ES 1927+654 with a TDE would be in line with the study of Merloni et al. (2015), which argued that another CL-AGN, where the blue contin-

uum and broad line emission have *disappeared* within less than a decade (LaMassa et al. 2015), was driven by a (fading) TDE. We note, however, that the freedom in setting the disruption time (t_d) – here set to the ATLAS (pre-discovery) detection of the optical transient on 2017 December 23 – allows to fit such power-law behavior to a vast range of observed light-curves. Moreover, the lack of extremely broad and strong He II $\lambda 4686$ line emission ($\text{FWHM}[\text{He II}] > 10000 \text{ km s}^{-1}$; $F[\text{He II}] \gg F[\text{H}\beta]$); the spectral evolution of the continuum and Balmer lines; and the peculiar X-ray light-curve, are all different than those seen in tidal disruptions occurring in inactive galaxies (e.g., Gezari et al. 2012; Arcavi et al. 2014; Holoien et al. 2014; Komossa 2015). A TDE in an AGN could instead look different, given the interaction between the TDE and the pre-existing accretion disk. Detailed modeling of such events is required for comparison with our observations.

Real-time identification and follow-up of events such as AT 2018zf/ASASSN-18el offer a spectacular opportunity to resolve the mystery of CL-AGN, and to improve our understanding of accretion and BLR physics. Fulfilling this potential would require high-cadence optical spectroscopy and complementary multi-wavelength data, for a proper sample of such events. With the increasing number, cadence, and sky coverage of imaging time-domain surveys (e.g., ASAS-SN, ATLAS, ZTF, LSST) and responsive spectroscopic follow-up (e.g., using the Las Cumbres observatory network, ePESSTO, SDSS-V), such events will increasingly be caught in the act.

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⁸ <http://www.astropy.org>

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Software: astropy (The Astropy Collaboration et al. 2013, 2018), SExtractor (Bertin & Arnouts 1996) MAAT (Ofek 2014)

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