Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism: A Philosophy of Minor Genres

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Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism: A Philosophy of Minor Genres

Let us recall the controversy sparked by the proposal, in August of 2018, to create a new movie category for the Oscars—"best popular film"—which would have recognized blockbuster movies, including, for example, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), a superb film that is now being honored again due to the untimely death of its lead actor, Chadwick Boseman. Opponents argued that, in principle, the Oscars already recognize films that are both "great" and popular: from *New York-Miami* (1935) to *Titanic* (1998), *Gladiator* (2001), and *The Lord of the Rings* (2003). But for at least the last decade, it has been rare that a "popular" film (one with a very large audience such as *Black Panther*, which was a formative *experience* for many viewers) has been acknowledged by the institutions of cinema, and there is a certain virtuous hypocrisy in rejecting, even on the basis of excellent arguments, the creation of a specific category for movies that are in fact excluded from artistic recognition by the Academy.

The debate made clear the difficulty movie critics and the institutions of cinema have in accounting for the reality of "popular" culture. The audiences for art have changed since the end of the last century, and, due to a lack of study, adequate theoretical tools, and clear awareness of culture's shift toward "the common," philosophy has not yet sufficiently observed or analyzed this democratization of art in the age of digital media, or the constitution of a new set of values through the mass distribution of television series. And yet what we are witnessing today is simply the realization of what Ralph Waldo Emerson and later John Dewey called for: an art anchored in the spectator's experience and in everyday life[1]; an art that is not cut off from ordinary life or placed upon a pedestal.

In 1939, Walter Benjamin reflected on the effects of new technical possibilities for reproducing musical and plastic works of art; today, the expansion of the audience for art and the creation of new forms, agents, and models of artistic action and practice thanks to the digital turn

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[1] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, NY: Perigree, 1980), chapter 1.

have transformed the very definition of art and are contesting elitist understandings of "great art." As Marc Cerisuelo reminds us, citing Erwin Panofsky's 1936 essay "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," Panofsky was the first to insist on the fact that "film was first and foremost created as popular entertainment without aesthetic pretension, and 're-established that dynamic contact between art production and art consumption, which…is sorely attenuated—if not entirely interrupted—in many other fields of artistic endeavor.'"[2] Today, this understanding and defense of an art that has not lost contact with its audience extends beyond cinema and into television series and other widespread cultural practices (Internet videos, etc.). A profound transformation of the cultural field and its hierarchies is underway, as evidenced by the academic world's change in attitude towards television series. TV series, previously seen as either mind-numbing or ideologically driven mass-market products—or as guilty pleasures for intellectuals in need of entertainment—have now become objects of study. Above all, and in line with the thinking of Stanley Cavell and with the pragmatist aesthetics that came before him, they have come to be seen as sites where artistic and hermeneutic authority is re-appropriated, and where spectators are re-empowered through the constitution of unique experiences. The question of their status as *art* remains. My goal here will be to use the Dewey's analysis in *Art as Experience* to affirm not only the importance of TV series in our lives, but also their status as art.

Reflection on popular culture and its "ordinary" objects—such as "mainstream" movies—leads to a transformation of theory and of criticism, as Cavell was one of the first to realize. Cavell is less concerned with inverting artistic hierarchies or the relationship between theory and practice than with the transformation of self necessitated by our encounter with new experiences. The framework that he proposed for cinema—that of cultural democracy—is also valid for TV series. To use it, we must also prove the need for TV criticism, and define its form—a challenge raised by the great critic and analyst of popular culture, Robert Warshow, who, in *The Immediate Experience* (a title that has the ring of a pragmatist proclamation), maintained that:

> We are all "self-made men" culturally, establishing ourselves in terms of the particular choices we make from among the confusing multitude of stimuli that present themselves to us. Something more than the pleasures of personal cultivation is at stake when one

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[2] Marc Cerisuelo, "L'importance du cinéma," in *Stanley Cavell: Cinéma et philosophie*, ed. Marc Cerisuelo and Sandra Laugier (Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2001), 19.

chooses to respond to Proust rather than to Mickey Spillane, to Laurence Olivier in Oedipus Rex rather than Sterling Hayden in The Asphalt Jungle. And when one has made the "right" choice, Mickey Spillane and Sterling Hayden do not disappear; perhaps no one gets quite out of sight of them. There is great need, I think, for a criticism of "popular culture" which can acknowledge its pervasive and disturbing power without ceasing to be aware of the superior claims of the higher arts, and yet without a bad conscience.[3]

Beyond the question of popular and of "mass" culture, it is a question of our capacity for unique aesthetic actions and choices in the midst of everything that is offered to us. This is a point Dewey also made when he insisted on the agency of the art lover, who contributes as much to the making of a work its author does. In claiming this, he went against a museum-based understanding of the fine arts, and saw art as an essential practice and driver of social action, and thus a practice and driver of real democracy, if democracy is understood not only as an institutional construct but as the requirement that one participate in public life. This explains why thinking about popular culture is equally important in both Dewey's *Art as Experience* and in *The Public and Its Problems*.

Cavell only rarely referred to Dewey explicitly, and may even seem to have neglected him. But we know from Cavell's autobiography, *Little Did I Know*, that he read and began to teach *Art and Experience* and *Human Nature and Conduct* quite early on, starting in 1948 at UCLA—even before becoming interested in Wittgenstein, who, on Cavell's first reading, appeared to contribute nothing more than what Dewey had. He even wrote a 70-page paper on Dewey for one of his professors at UCLA, Donald Piatt.[4] It is thus high time bring these two thinkers together on the question of popular culture in the broad sense, of which TV series are the clearest example—even if, for different reasons, neither Cavell nor Dewey discussed them directly.

Cavell noted with regard to Robert Warshow that when criticism turns to such objects, a specific form of attention is required, and a kind of "personal writing," since it is only by trusting oneself that one can write about an entirely unique kind of experience, one that is both particular and shared:

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[3] Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre & Other Aspects of Popular Culture*, Expanded Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), xxxvii.
[4] Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 245.

While the likes of T.S. Eliot and Henry James . . . are great artists, unlike those who create the comic strip Krazy Kat and write Broadway plays and make Hollywood movies, the latter say things he (also) wants to hear, or rather things he (also) can and must understand his relation to; this relation manifests the way he lives, his actual life of culture. He concludes that to say what he finds in these more everyday concerns he needs to write personally, but it seems clear that the reverse is equally true, that he wants to attend to them because that attention demands of him writing that is personal, and inspires him to it.[5]

Like Dewey, Cavell and Warshow are deeply involved in the democratization of culture, the only way toward to democratize democracy itself and the only form citizen education based on self-trust and self-confidence.[6] The arrival of popular culture onto the artistic scene displaces our conceptual categories, which have been challenged by the waning of autotelism and of an aestheticizing understanding of art. It definitively validates pragmatist aesthetics, which refuse to make art a sphere of activity separate from ordinary life or to see an individual creator as the sole "maker" of a work. It leads to reconsidering the relations between art and democracy, to doing away with fixed or institutionalized (whether politically or culturally) definitions of each of them, and instead to organizing them pragmatically around actual and shared values, practices, and forms of life. In this context, we may redefine popular culture: no longer as "entertainment" (even if that is part of its social mission), but also as a collective labor of moral education, as the production of values and ultimately of reality. This culture (comprised of blockbuster movies, TV series, music, videos shared on the Internet, etc.) plays a crucial role in re-evaluating ethics, and in constituting real democracy on the basis of images, scenes, and characters—on the basis of values that are expressed and shareable.

The question for Cavell remains that of the criticism that one can produce (and share) of this experience, and his philosophical ambition in *Must We Mean What We Say?* was to situate "modernism" during a period when criticism itself was struggling with skepticism and had to re-create self-trust out of the ashes of experience. Cavell explains what led him to write about cinema at a moment when no other philosopher was interested in it:

Film had for me become essential in my relation to the arts generally, as the experience of my extended bouts of moviegoing in New York and Los Angeles and Berkeley proved

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[5] Stanley Cavell, "After Half a Century," in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, 292.

[6] Albert Ogien and Sandra Laugier, *Le principe démocratie: enquête sur les nouvelles formes du politique* (Paris: Découverte, 2014).

to me…Philosophers, it seemed, had almost without exception left the field alone. Should this be taken for granted? Or oughtn't the fact of this neglect itself inspire suspicion? Given my restiveness with philosophy's treatment, or avoidance, or stylization, of human experience—a restiveness that is a treasured inheritance from my early reading of John Dewey and of William James—what better way to challenge the avoidance than through the worldwide phenomenon of cinema?[7]

Later, Cavell again evokes Dewey and James when he describes what he owes to their critique of empiricism: "to take a fundamental, I hope imperishable, insight of Dewey's and of William James's—the way the classical empiricists distort or stylize experience."[8]

This dissatisfaction or agitation in the face of philosophy's avoidance (a key concept in early Cavell) of experience—and in particular by philosophy that claims to be rooted in experience—is indeed what Cavell owes to his reading of Dewey, even if for him this reading was not sufficient to describe the unique experience of cinema—or, I would add, of television series.

Popular Culture and Ordinary Aesthetics

In spite of the progress that has been made in the philosophy of film, we are lacking analyses of the ethical stakes, modes of expressivity, and moral education at work in TV series and in the experiences of their viewers. We may begin with Cavell's *reading* of films, with how it is anchored in the works themselves, and with his way of showing that a film (taken as a whole, including its actors and production) brings its own intelligence into its making, and that this intelligence itself educates us, leading us to recognize and appreciate our own tastes as movie fans, and thus to come know ourselves. This reading is even more valuable for TV series, and it opens the way for a pragmatist approach to our relations to the filmographic and televisual fields.

An ordinary aesthetics must defend not the specificity of the individuals who create works, nor works as such, but a common and shareable aesthetic experience. One of Cavell's aims and greatest achievements is to have shown the "intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making," which amounts to letting a work of art *have its own voice* in what

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[7] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 423.
[8] Ibid*.,* 497.

philosophy will say about it.[9] Understanding the relation of cinema to philosophy thus implies learning what it means to "check one's experience," to use the expression from *Pursuits of Happiness*[10]—that is, what it means to examine one's own experience and "let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it."[11] This means that one must educate one's experience so that one can be educated by it. There is an inevitable circularity at work here: *having* an experience requires trusting one's experience. This role of trust in education makes popular culture an essential resource for moral education.

For Cavell, there is a parallel between the relationship of cinema to high art and the relationship of ordinary language philosophy to "high" philosophy. In both cases it is a matter of a change in orientation and a shift of importance towards life, following one of Dewey's insights in *Art as Experience*. Philosophy, then, is connected to the self-education that cinema provides, and which can be defined as each person's *cinematographic autobiography*, to use Cavell's concept: the way in which our lives include fragments of movies; the way in which we orient ourselves in relation to these key moments, which are just as much a part of our experience as the dreams or real moments that haunt us are. Cinema, like TV series, presents us with important moments, moments of transformation—moment that in real life are fleeting and indeterminate, or which require years or an entire lifetime to understand. Such understanding requires a form of autonomy, of "self-reliance," to use Emerson's concept: learning to trust one's experience and to render one's judgement self-sufficient.

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell defined philosophy as "the education of grownups."[12] This definition parallels his goal in his works on cinema (where he focused primarily on Hollywood movies), which is to assign popular culture the role of changing us. For Cavell, as for Dewey, the value of culture lies in its capacity to transform us, and philosophy consists in "bring[ing] my own language and life into imagination" and in "a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my life and words": "In this light, philosophy becomes

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[9] Stanly Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 10.
[10] Ibid., 12.
[11] Ibid., 10.
[12] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.

the education of grownups…The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups this is not natural growth, but *change*."[13]

Cavell also calls this philosophical undertaking "moral education," or "pedagogy," as in the subtitle to *Cities of Words:* "*Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*." This pedagogical claim regarding the task of philosophy recalls Dewey's involvement in the science of education. For both authors, the educational value of popular culture is more than anecdotal; it defines how both "popular" and "culture" (in the sense of *Bildung*) ought to be understood in the expression "popular culture." The vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* (in Dewey's sense) rather than the institution and valorization of a socially targeted corpus. Popular culture does not refer to a primitive or inferior version of culture, but rather to a shared democratic culture that creates common *values* and serves as a resource for a form of self-education—or more specifically, a form of culture of the self, a subjective perfecting or subjectivation that occurs through sharing and commenting on ordinary and public material that is integrated into ordinary life.

It is in this sense that, to cite Warshow again, "we are all self-made men." Cinema is at the heart of popular culture: "movies…are the most highly developed and most engrossing of the popular arts, and …seem to have an almost unlimited power to absorb and transform the discordant elements of our fragmented culture."[14] In reading this passage, one cannot help but transfer the remark to TV series, which are certainly—even more than movies—a repository of all of culture, and absorb and recycle elements from music, video games, classical television—and of course, movies. That which Cavell claimed for Hollywood popular movies—their capacity to create a culture shared by millions—has been transferred onto other corpora and practices, in particular, onto TV series, which have taken up, if not taken over, the task of educating the public. Cavell's argument in *Cities of Words* was both ethical and perfectionist, if we redefine morality in new terms: no longer in terms of "the good" or judgment, but rather the *exploration* of our forms of life. For Cavell, there is an affinity between cinema—*good* movies—and a particular understanding of the good, an understanding that is foreign to so-called "dominant moral theories." The importance and benefit of extending this aesthetic and ethical method to include TV series is equally ethical, for these works are as shared and public as

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, xxxviii.

movies were in the 20ᵗʰ century; they reach a significant audience and play an educational role, and perhaps even more clearly than cinema, they make it possible to anchor the value of a work in the experience one has of it.

We need to rethink what we mean today by popular culture (which is no longer exactly popular in the social or political sense in which certain arts—songs, folklore—once were, even if popular culture sometimes draws on the resources of these arts) by connecting it more clearly to the notion of the *public*. TV series are the sites of the education of individuals, an education that amounts to a form of subjective perfecting through sharing and discussing public and ordinary material, which is integrated into individuals' lives and is a source of conversation.

Cavell's ordinary aesthetics deliberately goes against the traditional critical approach, where there is an obsession with art as a *separate domain*—a view admirably criticized by Dewey—and with the mystique of the individual creator, as well as with "representation" and image, to the detriment of the ordinary experience of seeing a movie, which is the subjective— but always shared—experience of *public* material. For Cavell, cinema is a form of shared experience, and in movies it is a matter less of aesthetics than of *practice*—an ordinary practice that connects and reconciles the private and the public, subjective expectation and the sharing of the common.

The forms of popular culture that interest me here are those that are capable of transforming our existences by educating and cultivating our ordinary experience, not only in the classical sense of training our aesthetic taste, but in the sense of a moral training that is constitutive of our singularity. Cavell, radically combining Emerson's analyses (in his essay "Experience") and Dewey's (in his chapter "Having an Experience" in *Art as Experience*), emphasizes that it is important to be able to *educate one's experience* in such a way that one can have confidence in it and in this way to live it. Cinephilia is a form of education of the self, and series-philia is even more so. This education does not occur through exposure to a set of universal masterpieces (even if such TV classics do now exist), but through the constitution of one's personal list of favorite movies or series and of scenes that are appropriate to various circumstances or occasions of one's life, when they are re-mobilized.

The question is what the ordinary does to philosophy. Cinematographic art, whether in the form of movies or TV series, is "popular" art because the experience of it underlies ordinary experience, just as Dewey maintained that aesthetic experience is emblematic of experience in

general. This experience is *moral*—both mysterious and ordinary, personal and public. It is ordinary because nothing is more shareable and self-evident than going to see movies or watching shows and talking about them, and these are often moments in which we re-enact our agreement in language. It is a mysterious form of knowledge, this coming to know what counts for oneself, and there is nothing easy or immediate about it. The only source for verifying one's description of what counts is *oneself*—whence the role of confidence, of trust in one's own experience,[15] which is the source of moral perfectionism and the only basis for public education and public moral expression.

Cavell discusses "the importance of importance" in chapter 3 of *Pursuits of Happiness*. Television series continue the realist quest for the ordinary and the pedagogical task undertaken by cinema, of providing an inseparably subjective and public education. Let us recall here that Cavell's point of departure for his study was Tolstoy's move to replace the question of art's essence with that of its *importance*. Importance is not something extra, an afterthought. To master a concept, in Wittgensteinian terms, requires knowing what role a word plays in our usages, which amounts to knowing its role, its importance in our lives, its place within our form of life. To master a concept is thus to know its importance: our criteria of usage spell out what counts for us, in the sense both of what is identified as falling under a concept (what "counts as"), and in the sense of what arouses our interest and represents a value for us. This priority of importance and mattering over the beautiful and the true (or the redefinition of the latter in terms of the former) as concepts governing ordinary experience is the heart of Cavell's definition of a culture of the ordinary. This does not imply some falsely revolutionary inversion of values, but rather a new assessment of importance.

Wittgenstein called for just such a new assessment of importance and of what counts in an essential passage in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where he calls for ordinary language philosophy and attention to real life:

> Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand.[16]

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[15] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, chapter 3.
[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), §118.

This shifting of *the important* to the heart of thought can be said to define the ontology of popular culture, which constitutes a family (in the Wittgensteinian sense of family resemblances) rather than a distinct domain. There are clear connections here to pragmatism and its radical pluralism, since it is reality itself that is defined by the arts and their implication in our experience.

Elementary Forms of Shared Experience

Public and popular forms of cultural production are democratic in the sense that, today, as demonstrated by the proliferation of blogs, amateur criticism, or even just any conversation about a popular series demonstrates, they ascribe to each individual the capacity to *trust his or her judgment*. TV series and the place that they and their worlds have come to occupy in spectators' lives demonstrate series' relationship to individual experience and the fact that they pursue the pedagogical task undertaken by popular cinema—that of an inseparably subjective and public education. This intertwining of the private and the public is also an intertwining of modes of constitution of the public, and is equally expressed in new modes of subjectivation by the public.

Television series are typically collective works, and in a sense they are detached from the individuality of their creators. The best series (with a few exceptions, such as those by David Lynch) definitively do away with the mythology of the great author. They are also determined by the materiality of the work and by those who make it, as Dewey emphasizes.[17] Cavell includes in "the intention" of a work its authors, actors, and technicians, its production constraints, the expectations of the public in scriptwriting, and so on. This ordinary aesthetics of series opens the possibility of shifting the hierarchies of aesthetic interest by making clear the moral and intellectual value of ordinary practices and the expressivity of overlooked figures, as for example in classic HBO series such as *Sex and the City* and *The Wire*, which gave voice to women and to Black youth respectively, and depicted their forms of life.

TV series connect the private to the public in a new way.[18] In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey defined the public on the basis of an encounter with a problematic situation, in which people experience a specific difficulty that they initially perceive as being part of private

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[17] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, chapters 1 and 3.
[18] Sandra Laugier, *Nos vies en séries* (Paris : Climats Flammarion, 2019).

life. According to him, the concept of the public is the response to this difficulty, a response that is never pre-determined and which emerges through the interactions of those who decide to give the problem public expression. Understood in light of this theory of the public, television inherits the task that Cavell saw as belonging to popular cinema: the moral education and constitution of a public.

Cavell explicitly took the popularity of cinema as his starting point. This realist quality comes not from any aesthetics or theory of "representation," but rather of "minding"; the interest actually mobilized by the popular, the care and commitment the popular in fact commands. What distinguishes cinema from other arts is this collective interest: everyone (at least at the time when Cavell was writing his first works) *cares* about movies.

> Rich and poor, those who care about no (other) art and those who live on the promise of art, those whose pride is education and those whose pride is power or practicality—all care about movies, await them, respond to them, remember them, talk about them, hate some of them, are grateful for some of them.[19]

And, of course, this is even more obvious in the case of TV series.

Thus, cinema belongs to *the shared experience of minding*, and from this emerges a new, pragmatist definition of culture. Cavell does not speak of seeing a movie, but rather of "moviegoing": it is not so much a matter of aesthetics as of a democratic practice that connects and reconciles the private and the public. This means that, as Dewey insisted, it is the experience of a work and its continuity with everyday life that is primary. The very invention of cinema challenged what Dewey called "a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience."[20]

The educational value of popular culture is essential to its democratic quality. Today, this allows us to define what must be understood by "popular" in the expression "popular culture" and to revisit the concept of "pop culture"—a colloquial abbreviation that does not make it any easier to take these arts seriously. For Cavell and for Dewey, the stakes of our relation to popular culture are political. Cavell dismisses the line of thought that claims that all art passes through a "popular" stage in its infancy, as if there were a natural hierarchy or evolution from popular art to great art, and as if were possible to measure an art's life span and to see it as a living being with a period of youth and of maturity. Panofsky's view was that cinema took up the popular

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[19] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enlarged (Cambridge, MA: 1971), 4-5.
[20] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 10.

genres of tragedy, romance, crime, adventure, and comedy when moviemakers understood that these genres "could be transfigured…by the exploitation of the unique and specific possibilities of the new medium."[21] But for Panofsky, it is a matter of exploring new *aesthetic* possibilities; he does not consider in detail the practical possibilities of a widespread sharing of experience, the inclusion of this experience in the viewer's private life, or the education of one's viewing.

"Moviegoing" transforms our existences by educating our ordinary experience, shaping not only our aesthetic tastes but our morality as well. This is never as obvious as in our choice of the films or series that mark moments of our lives. The ordinariness of popular culture emerges in our capacity to define our uniqueness through our allegiances and values in relation to it; I am thinking here of things like the "Top 5" lists in the film *High Fidelity* (Nick Hornby and S. Frears, 2000), and more recently in the series *High Fidelity* (starring Zoë Kravitz), through which the characters not only enumerate but literally *are* their tastes. Thus, the way in which each individual creates his or her own experience out of cinema makes it a democratic art: the democracy of the singular.

A Democratic Ontology

By recalling the democratic stakes of cinema, we are better able to perceive what is at stake for pragmatist aesthetics in TV series, whether through the validation of individual experience, the social nature of pragmatism, or the democratic dimension of art. It remains to be seen how we can go even further, and understand TV series as pragmatist art par excellence within the present context, in which cinema has acquired the status of art, and is defined as "high end" popular culture—frequently in contrast to TV series.

No reflection on ordinary aesthetics can ignore the issue Cavell confronted in refusing both the critic's contempt for forms seen as degraded and the contempt of intellectuals who might comfortably claim an interest in popular culture while maintaining the conviction that they occupy a position of superiority with respect to it. And it is even more difficult to convince people of the intelligence of popular TV series than it was for Cavell to convince readers of the intelligence of remarriage comedies, and today it is widely understood that there is a hierarchy

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[21] Erwin Panofsky, cited in Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 30.

between "quality" series (which are usually somber, cynical, and male-dominated) and the rest, a distinction that mirrors the hierarchy between "important" films and commercial movies.

The stakes have not changed since the birth of "modernism," which had to affirm itself in terms of self-trust. When Cavell's book *The World Viewed* was published, Rosalind Krauss considered it an "extreme curiosity"[22] from the point of view of those theoreticians of cinema who were readers and admirers of Eisenstein, Vertov, Brakhage, Snow, and Warhol. According to Krauss, Cavell combined historical ignorance with an inability to distinguish between *important*—that is, experimental—cinema, and a form of entertainment that barely merits being called "cinematic." The similarity to arguments made against television series by cinema purists is obvious. But this redefinition of the important is the hallmark of Cavell's approach to popular culture. In "More of the World Viewed," which Cavell wrote several years after *The World Viewed*, he contests the possibility of determining the importance of a film from a solely theoretical or historical point of view.[23] In art as in politics, *I* alone can say what counts, can determine the importance and significance of the movies or series I see. This is the deeply *democratic* aspect of the experience of cinema, which stands in contrast to the condescension that marks conventional approaches to the aesthetics and criticism of popular culture, and especially of TV series.

Characters as Vehicles and Sources of Values

The material of television series allows for contextualization, historicity (thanks to regular rhythms of viewing and their duration over the long term), and the familiarization and education of perception through our attention to the expressions and gestures of characters whom we come to know. Here we may think, for example, of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon, 1997-2003), a feminist work intended to morally transform a co-ed adolescent audience, which depicts an apparently ordinary teenage girl who is capable of fighting evil. In both mainstream movies and TV series, rather than the mystique of the author, we see the emergence of the force and impact of an actor's embodiment of a character.

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[22] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Rosalind Krauss on Dark Glasses and Bifocals," *Artforum* 12, no. 9 (May 1974): 59–62, https://www.artforum.com/print/197405/dark-glasses-and-bifocals-37376.
[23] Cavell, "More of the World Viewed," in *The World Viewed,* 162-230.

The characters of television fiction are so well anchored, morally guided, and clear in their moral expressions—without being archetypal—that they can be "released" and opened to the imagination and usage of all viewers, "entrusted" to us—as if it were up to each of us to take care of them. Whence the great importance of the conclusions to series, which must teach their viewers to go on without them. *Lost*, *Mad Men* and *The Americans*, are recent illustrations of the work that series do to guide us in separating from their characters. The movie or television actor or actress has the mysterious capacity for what Cavell defined as "photogenesis": the ability to make him- or herself perceptible to spectators and thereby to constitute the spectator's experience. Thus, the modes of expression of TV series actors (their moral texture, style of speech and gesture) is a veritable moral resource offered by popular culture. The question of morality is shifted toward the development of a common sensibility which is both pre-supposed and educated/transformed by the sharing of values.

Series create care and awaken affectivity through the representation of moving figures or situations. Their very form gives them their moral value and expressivity: the regularity with which viewers frequent them, the integration of characters into viewers' ordinary and familial lives, viewers' initiation into new and initially opaque forms of life and lexicons, viewers' attachment to characters, and finally, the methodology and modes of narration of series. This leads to revising the status of morality, and locating it not in rules, transcendental norms, or principles of decision-making, but rather in attention to ordinary behaviors, to everyday micro-choices, to individuals' styles of expressing themselves and making claims. These are transformations of morality that many philosophers, weary of overly abstract meta-ethics and overly normative deontological ethics, have called for. Some, like Martha Nussbaum, have tested this form of ethics on literary material. But the material of television series allows for an even more developed contextualization and a historicity of the public-private relation. One of the tasks of series philosophy would be to demonstrate, through a reading of the moral expressivity constituted by a series, the individual and collective moral choices, negotiations, conflicts, and agreements at the basis of moral representation: the choices and trajectories of fictional characters, the twists and turns of the plot.

In U.S. series such as *Lost*, *Six Feet Under*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Walking Dead*, there is a perfectionist moral quest that has democratic aims, since it seeks to be widely shared. Beyond their differences, these shows are all based on the desire to give public expression to

despair, and on the hope that new conversations will be born—what Cavell called "cities of words." They testify to a hope in the educability of viewer, who is obliged to pay attention, to mind. For both Warshow and Cavell, such perfectionism in the aesthetic and pragmatic imperative to invent a public defines popular culture and its "genres."

TV Series, a 21st-century Art

> The sense we now have for essential characteristics of persons and objects is very largely the result of art.[24]

In an essay dedicated to Cavell's ontology of cinema, Emmanuel Bourdieu defined the realism of cinema in terms of its entanglement with everyday life.[25] Indeed, it is as *experience* rather than as *object* that cinema interests me, and this is the basis for an ordinary theory of cinema that can be applied to series, making it possible to solidify the concrete (although perhaps overly romantic) idea of a *shared experience.* I propose the following principles for such a theory of shared experience:

1) **Educating** one's experience so one may be educated by it. Both Emerson and Dewey point to the circularity that, as I have noted, is inevitable: *having* an experience requires trusting one's experience.

2) **Finding the words to speak** an experience: this is the central theme Cavell develops in *The Claim of Reason*: the possibility and necessity of finding one's voice within one's story.[26] Having an experience is inseparable from the question of expression, and of the possibilities, which cinema explores, of the natural expressivity of human beings. This discovery, rooted in Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, is Cavell's favored mode of approach to images. "These film words thus declare their mimesis of ordinary words, words in daily conversation. A mastery of film writing and film making accordingly requires, for such films, a mastery of this mode of mimesis."[27]

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[24] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 294.

[25] Emmanuel Bourdieu, "Stanley Cavell—Pour une esthétique d'un art impur," in *Stanley Cavell: Cinéma et philosophie*, ed. Marc Cerisuelo and Sandra Laugier (Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2001), 57.

[26] Sandra Laugier, *Wittgenstein: le mythe de l'inexpressivité* (Paris: Vrin, 2010).

[27] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 11.

3) **Technological inventions or developments** determine the transformation of experience: Cavell discovers that the development of talking movies constituted a stage in the expressivity of humans and of women in particular, who found sites of existence in the genres of remarriage comedy and melodrama. The inscription of words in experience occurs through an actor or actress's complex embodiment of a character—complex because our experience of a character's words is marked by our earlier experiences of the actor or actress in other roles. This is even more true in the case of TV series, where we regularly visit with characters over the long term: we saw Alyson Hannigan in the role of Willow for seven years on *Buffy* (1997-2003), and this affects our view of *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) and our attachment to the character of Lily and to her expressivity. Or, take the example of Kiefer Sutherland, known for his role as Agent Jack Bauer in *24* (2001-2014), who also starred in in *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011), where he does not (really) save the world, and in *Designated Survivor* (2016-2019), where he plays the president of the United States; our perception of the latter two is enriched by our familiarity with the actor's earlier exploits. What gives series their educative force is our ordinary and repeated contact with characters who become our friends—not on the over-used model of identification, but rather that of contact, familiarization, and attachment.

4) **Regularity** and long-term, repeated contact with characters, which allows us to *let ourselves* be educated by the experience of the series, by our *reception* of it. "Reception" here does not refer to some kind of pure passivity; cumulative experience and our openness to repeating it makes the reception of series a combination of perception, cognition, and emotion, which can be analyzed in pragmatist terms. Cavell never focused on this point, but it is clear that the daily or weekly rhythm of series gives them a particular force, as does the way they fit into natural cycles (i.e. their "seasons"). Here we may think of Dewey's analysis of how aesthetic experience is rooted in "nature."

5) **The "small" screen of series** and the aesthetics specific to television are often used by cinephiles to devalorize them. But the format allows for additional expressivity; our nearness to the screen and its small size enhances close-up shots of characters' faces as they express emotions, and increases our awareness of how they change

physically over the years. Attachment to characters is also reinforced by the domestic context in which series are viewed. Although the domesticity of viewing has not disappeared, people now increasingly view series when they are away from home: while commuting on mass transit or on vacation. This in fact reinforces their integration into daily life, confirming Dewey's point that art is inscribed in the everyday.

6) **The genres of popular culture** certainly constitute the strongest conceptual link between cinema and TV series. Emmanuel Bourdieu, in the essay cited above, explains that one of cinema's particular characteristics is its internal reference to genres, the specific modality of its investigation into its own expressive potentialities. Other art forms appeal to the notion of genre, but they do so retrospectively, in order to classify earlier works or to differentiate one work within a genre. In contrast, cinema and series only exist within genres, which defines the popular: there is no essence of cinema just as for Wittgenstein there is no essence of language and just as for Dewey there is no essence of art. The development of popular culture puts forth the model of the "self-made" viewer, who forms his or her taste through his or her choice of favorite genres (for cinema, action movies, romantic comedies, Westerns, science fiction, vampire movies, vulgar comedies for teens; for TV series, procedurals, medical shows, family shows, fantasy, etc.), in contrast to the aristocratic distinction of art. Movies and series mutually influence one another along a continuum, an influence reinforced by the passing of actors and directors from one format to the other: Michael Mann, David Fincher, Jane Campion, and, of course, David Lynch.

Let us recall that for Cavell, the constitution of genres and their importance is based on a property specific to the making of films: the production of a movie is an enterprise that mobilizes not only the team behind one work, led by its director, but also, indirectly, the entire community of other filmmakers and all their works, since members of one team are highly likely to participate or to have participated in making other movies produced by the community in question.

Popular culture is defined precisely by the *creativity* specific to genre, which drives the creation of works. For example, given how seductive the character played

by James Stewart is to the heroine of *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor, 1942), the movie could easily have ended with their marriage, a possibility the movie briefly alludes to. But, as Cavell notes, it is the genre that decides—just as we know, without even needing any confirmation, that *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005) will also end with a remarriage (as most catastrophe movies do) and just as genre allows us to understand the somewhat strange ending of *The Affair* (Treem and Levi, 2014-2019), which depicts the reconciliation of the original couple in an apocalyptic future. Thus, cinema is full of explicit references to archetypal works and to the genres that these works contribute to constituting during a given period. TV series are themselves a compendium of these references: references to films or classical series through the "citation" of scenes or actors.

It is the openness of genre and its creativity that make possible its later productivity, including in the derivation of new genres. TV series have clearly inherited the conversational capacities of couples from the remarriage comedy genre, which has given them the grammar for their expressions, interactions, and emotions. Early 21st-century series have supplied forms of morality to an entire range of current genres: Mafia/cartel shows such as *Narcos* and *Mafiosa* draw from *The Sopranos*; political shows such as *Baron Noir* draw from *The West Wing*, metaphysical shows such as *The Leftovers* draw from *Lost*, and feminist ones such as *Girls* or *I May Destroy You* draw from *Sex and the City*. Thus, genre contains an element of empowerment for the generations of characters that follow, and it provides an expressive grammar, including for the viewer, who finds within it resources for his or her own feelings and situations. This creative aspect of genre, which was already present in cinema, has become more radical with TV series, which are explicitly terrains of ordinary expression and are themselves filled with moments of conversation about recent or classical comedies, which constitute their referential and moral universe, and with constant allusions to TV and movie characters. Thus, the viewer's ordinary competence is a capacity for expression furnished by his or her knowledge, or mastery, of a genre. Genre is not essence: its value comes from the expressive possibilities it opens for both actor and viewer, and Netflix productions, for example, are typical of this kind of recycling of genre. Genre provides proof of

concept of popular culture, of the fact that an experience is literally shared between creators and viewers.

7) **The end of the author and of privileged experience**: by eliding the problematic of the author, a theory of aesthetic genre specific to popular culture de-dramatizes the process of making. For creators, it is no longer a question of measuring oneself against a lineage of isolated geniuses—that is, making a unique place for oneself in a universe of absolutely unique, already constituted positions—but rather of becoming part of a collective enterprise by collaborating in it through one's own contribution. This consists in exploring inherited and shared genres or in inventing new ones in concert with other creators, genres that will in turn serve as frameworks and engines for new collective explorations, and ultimately for the derivation of different genres, and so on. Netflix is part of this liberation and regularly opens the way toward creative explorations, in particular outside of the U.S.

And it is no longer indispensable for the viewer or critic to create, in isolation, an entirely singular opinion of a work, without being influenced by anybody else. The pleasure and attachment that films and series create are above all collective experiences and evaluations, rather than individual judgments. We are now well aware of the sexist nature of the cult of the author, which has contributed to keeping women and other minorities at the margins of "visible" cinematographic production. The collective nature of production has been particularly successful in the work of female showrunners, of whom there are now many.

Thus, perhaps the definition of experience proposed by pragmatism, as rich and as suited to popular culture as it is, does not provide the means to analyze and be transformed by the experience of the new arts of the 20th and 21st centuries. Cavell, citing Warshow, writes that

> [Warshow] expresses his sense of the necessarily personal in various ways…namely, a sense of the writer's having to invent his own audience, of the writer's having to invent all the meanings of experience (p. 16), of the modern intellectual's "facing the necessity of describing and clarifying an experience which has itself deprived him of the vocabulary he requires to deal with it" (p. 9).[28]

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[28] Cavell, in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, 292.

What is at stake is no longer simply *having* an experience, or the recognition or enlargement of the concept of aesthetic experience, which Dewey put at the center of experience itself. The true legacy of pragmatist aesthetics lies not only in the radical changes proposed by Dewey—the refusal of an existence that would be separate from art, the affirmation of aesthetic experience as ordinary and shared, the recognition of the agency that exists within "reception." It is also the aesthetic and ethical exigency to take into account the productions of popular culture, what Warshow called its "pervasive and disturbing force."[29] It is the search for words to describe an experience that has precisely deprived you of the words you need to face it.

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[29] Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, xxxvii.